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What makes a game announcement worthy enough for tears to be shed? It's the question that has been pestering me since Sony's E3 press conference in June as *Shenmue III* and *Final Fantasy VII Remake* were announced. The emotion on show was like nothing I had ever seen before (outside of YouTube videos of kids unwrapping N64s of course) and it left me wondering what exactly it was about these games that has made them so dear to people's hearts.

A few key elements appear to be important. First, enough distance in time between a game's last appearance and the announcement. No one is going to well up over a *Call Of Duty* or *Assassin's Creed* reveal. But then again, we can't see too many people losing their cool over a *Conker* sequel either, so there's more to it than just that. Rose-tinted glasses can be potent, but they're not enough.

Second, a dramatic or adult theme to the original game. *FFVII* is one of the darker entries in the series and *Shenmue* took itself pretty seriously in terms of its gameplay mechanics and the emotional attachment with the characters. These games dug deep into people. But a *Heavy Rain 2* isn't going to have them wailing in the aisles.

No, it takes a third element to make an announcement worthy of weeping, and that's improbability. I think of all things it was the unlikeliness of either of these games happening that made them stand out. For every fan that tweeted and mailed and harassed the developers to bring their beloved game back, there had to be a dozen who had given up long ago. The reaction was something special. It was one of those rare moments of pure joy in gaming that cynicism couldn't really penetrate. For that alone, 2015 has been an important year already.



Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR




9 LIFE:






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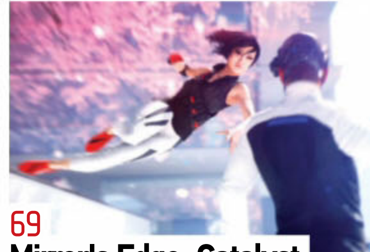
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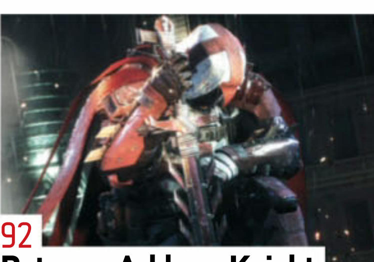
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100 HOTTEST NEW GAMES
We take a look at the most exciting, innovative and interesting games to come out of this year's E3 conference, and how they're going to shape the games we play for years to come

(THE PEOPLE HAVE SPOKEN)

The Day Fan Power Won

→The biggest announcements from this year's E3 were all fuelled by fan demand, but what does that mean for the future of the industry?

The keys to the kingdom appear to have been handed over to the mob, and it may be the best thing that could have happened. As we were left reeling from massive announcements at one of the best E3s in recent memory, the search for a traditional 'winner' of the show seemed to arrive at only one possible answer: gamers.

The power of the fans was in evidence throughout the showcase as all the big reveals were inspired by fervent fanbases who refused to let go. First among these communities is clearly those who celebrated the biggest shock of the event, the return of *Shenmue*.



Above There was very little sales or business talk from the big companies as even console pricing was left for later in the year where typically we might have seen a price drop announced.

The #SaveShenmue community has been working tirelessly, jumping on every mention of the game and every possibility to raise a sequel it can get. If you ever tweeted anything about *Shenmue* directly or even most-wanted sequels then chances are your feed filled up pretty fast with #SaveShenmue messages. It was a simple and ultimately very effective campaign. It kept the name of Yu Suzuki's seminal RPG series in the minds of journalists so they kept asking about it, and it kept it in the minds of the big companies, Sony ultimately being the ones to jump in and help get the sequel made.

Perhaps less intensely, *Final Fantasy VII* is consistently the most demanded title from the

DATA STREAM → XBOX ONE BACKWARDS COMPATIBILITY WILL INCLUDE DLC, ACCORDING TO MICROSOFT

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series with every new console generation. Fans just seem to love being able to play it again and again. Then, the idea that it could be completely remade with modern graphics and systems began to take hold. Again, seeing it on the main conference stage for the PlayStation 4 was a massive win for fan power.

And while fans would appear to be the big winners of E3, Sony was the company that delivered the most intense blast of fan service from all the big companies as it also revealed *The Last Guardian* again, a game that PlayStation fans and admirers of Team Ico have been pleading for more information on for years. It was a conference where a lot of diehard fans saw their dreams come true.

But why now? Why this year? We can't help but look at the rise of things like Steam Greenlight and Kickstarter and find a correlation between fan power driving the making of games that appeal to specific niches and a sudden interest in serving those niches from companies. When fans feel abandoned by the franchises they love, they fund other competitor titles instead, such as *Sim City* fans flocking to *Cities: Skylines* or *Castlevania* fans backing the new title *Bloodstained*. Such campaigns are all the more powerful thanks to original creators also being associated with them.

> "No matter where I go I'm asked about the third version… finally we can continue from Shenmue II"
> Yu Suzuki, Ys Net

The age of Kickstarter has shown that we are willing to back ideas we like with our own money. We are willing to engage with the games industry as participants in the development, not just as consumers. The likes of *Shenmue* and *Final Fantasy* fans were willing to do it without even a hint that their efforts would reach fruition, but it ultimately paid off.

And while Sony has invested in the development *Shenmue III* and kept *The Last Guardian* alive, it was probably Microsoft that ultimately had to make the biggest investment of time and money in its fan-pleasing announcement: backwards compatibility. While most of the other announcements we've mentioned cost very little but are likely to deliver a lot in terms of fan appreciation, backwards compatibility would appear to have been a major investment for the Xbox team with little reward other than appreciation from longer-term Xbox 360 players. We're not sure it's enough to sway the fence-sitters, but it impressed us that Microsoft tried to do it anyway. Having turned around on its most disliked features over the last two years, making backwards compatibility work on Xbox One feels like the final step to redeeming the Xbox One name.

This was an exciting E3 to be a gamer, particularly for those of us that have enjoyed games for years, and while the fruits of these announcements remain some way off, it made for a very special event.





Above It was another year of record attendance for E3 in Los Angeles with a total attendance of 52,200 from 109 different countries by its close.



Below Indie titles took a little more of a back seat this year as big announcements and gameplay demos appeared to take over on all the big conference stages.

Reader Reaction

What were your E3 highlights?

- I'm looking forward to *Fallout 4* and *The Last Guardian* - two games that should be classics!
Adrian Fisher

- *Fallout 4*.
@its_miawallace

- Gotta be *Fallout 4* followed by *Horizon*.
@Chipite

- *Shenmue III*. Can't remember anything else.
Joël Hartmann

- *Unravel* and *The Last Guardian* for me!
@spookyview

- Love the look of *Horizon: Zero Dawn*. *Ghost Recon: Wildlands*, *The Last Guardian* & *Unravel*. *Doom* & *Fallout 4*. Lots of highlights.
@MrATav

- *Fallout 4* could easily be the best one in a great series, so looking forward to that. Game wise, Nintendo let me down, but their presentation was definitely the most fun to watch. The biggest surprise was no price drop announcements. Not even from Nintendo!
Sam Troch

- *Halo 5* followed by *ReCore* – both look brilliant and show the breadth of awesome gaming coming our way.
@XboxFriends

- I thought *Dreams* looked pretty interesting but it depends how the actual game will work.
@Cold_Waste

- *Uncharted 4*, *Horizon*, *Abzu*, *Firewatch*, *Deus Ex*, *Edith Finch*, *TLG* and *Unravel*.
@NaughtyGods





The Burning Questions

→ E3 revealed a lot, but it left just as much unanswered





IS NINTENDO IN TROUBLE?

■ WHERE FANS LOOKED forward to *Metroid*, *F-Zero* and perhaps a new *3D Mario*, we got *Metroid Prime: Federation Force*, and *Animal Crossing: Happy Home Designer*. *The Legend Of Zelda* skipped the show and NX, the next Nintendo console, was teased for 2016. Does that mean Nintendo is in trouble? We would say it puts the Wii U in a challenging position going into the end of the year and 2016. Strong games can keep interest, but promise for the future can go a long way too and right now the Wii U feels like a ship fans and even developers are abandoning in anticipation of the next raft. We like the look of *Super Mario Maker* and *Xenoblade Chronicles X*, but it needed to make more of its time in the E3 spotlight.

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE PS VITA?

■ SONY'S MOBILE GAMING device was noticeably absent from E3 this year, with very little time or space allotted to it. Sales of the Vita have not been incredible, even though its functionality with the PS4 is actually quite impressive. That Sony devoted no real time to the device in favour of PS4 and Project Morpheus demos for its E3 conference could be a bad sign for the future of the device. That said, we might argue that Vita demos are the bane of E3 conferences as while they are undoubtedly fun and often quite innovative, they are exactly the wrong kind of games to be shown off on a large screen in front of the world. Hopefully that just means the handheld has been put to the side temporarily.





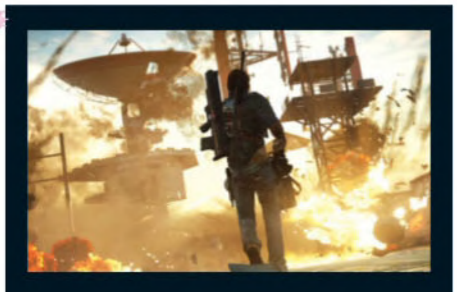
IS HOLOLENS REAL?

■ THE DEMO OF Microsoft's exciting augmented reality tech at E3 was very exciting, but also very contentious. Was the demo 100 per cent real? Is that really what you would be able to see and do? Well, partially yes, as hands-on with the device proved that much of what was shown off playing *Minecraft* on stage is in fact possible. The only real difference is that the field of view is somewhat limited with the headset, so the full world illusion is lost. You can read our full analysis of the HoloLens experience in our lead feature, but it's safe to say that HoloLens is currently a deeply impressive, but limited piece of tech. The promise of full augmented reality is still some way off, even if Microsoft has gotten closer than anyone else.



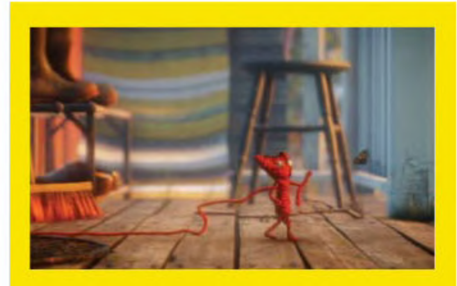
IS JAPAN BACK IN THE GAME?

■ ON TOP OF Square Enix boasting a strong line-up for 2015, we saw a number of other Japanese developers announce or reveal very exciting new titles at E3 this year. Inafune is working with Microsoft on *ReCore*; *MGSV* looks better than ever; Platinum Games appears to be the most in-demand studio for action games on the planet with *Transformers Devastation* now added to its slate; The Last Guardian is back… It's been a tough few years for Japanese game makers as their homeland appears to be moving further away from console gaming, but you wouldn't necessarily guess that from the titles on the way. We think this could be the start of a Japanese gaming renaissance.



HAS SQUARE GONE MAD?

■ WE ASK THIS question in the friendliest manner possible and with full knowledge that Square Enix has one of the strongest lineups of games of any publisher in the next year. *Hitman*, *Just Cause 3*, *Final Fantasy XV*, *FFVII Remake*, *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided*, *Kingdom Hearts III*, *NieR New Project*, and *Star Ocean 5*; this is a fine stable of titles, many of which are scheduled for release in 2015, but we didn't get that from the conference. The whole presentation of the event seemed to play down how far along many of these games are and how cool they can be. The disparity between the strength of its games and the way they were shown off left us more than a little confused.



DID EA FIND ITS HEART?

■ ELECTRONIC ARTS GETS a bad rap, but as one of the biggest publishers in the world, with multi-million dollar franchises under its belt, some of its pricing policies and DLC releasing strategies are bound to be scrutinised. It was something of a surprise and delight, even to the most cynical gamer, to see EA reveal *Unravel*, a platformer in the vein of a *Limbo* or UbiArt release. Could Ubisoft's venture into indie-inspired game-making as a playground for studio creativity be rubbing off on its competitors? Whatever caused it to happen, we would never have pinned *Unravel* as a EA release in the past, but it's an adorable-looking game and hopefully the beginning of a new trend from EA.



BETHESDA IS HONOURING A FAN'S PREORDER OF FALLOUT 4 AFTER HE SENT BOXES OF BOTTLE CAPS

Where Were These Games?

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA

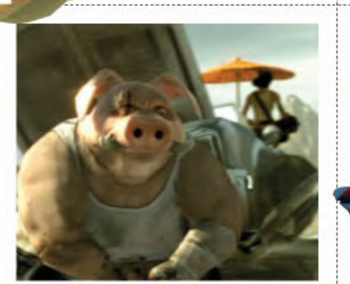
ALREADY DELAYED TO 2016, Nintendo announced early that its next, open-world Zelda title for Wii U would not be appearing at E3, but we rather hoped it was in favour of other big announcements. Ultimately we missed out on both.



MAFIA III

WE HAVE been anticipating that this sequel would be revealed for some time, but again we got a different game instead as 2K revealed *XCOM 2* rather than a follow-up to its sandbox crime drama. We still expect it soon, though.

BEYOND GOOD & EVIL 2



WE'RE NOW entering *Shenmue* levels of expectancy with Michel Ancel's follow up to *Beyond Good & Evil*. It was revealed in 2008 with a teaser and barely spoken of since. The latest appears to be it's not even in active development.

GRAN TURISMO 7

POLYPHONY DIGITAL is not a team to be rushed, so perhaps it's no surprise that the PlayStation's premier racing sim has yet to be fully revealed. TGS may yet prove to be the better ground for the PS4 to get its first *GT* entry.

TITANFALL 2





ANOTHER SEQUEL with plenty of rumours surrounding it, one being that it would be on the Sony stage at E3 and perhaps even a PS4 exclusive. As it happens, it was nowhere to be seen, but a sequel is very likely in the next couple of years.

GOD OF WAR 4

MANY EXPECTED this series would return at E3, especially since we're awaiting a PS4 re-release of *God Of War III*, but Kratos did not make an appearance. Instead we got Horizon, which was actually a little more exciting.

PRINCE OF PERSIA



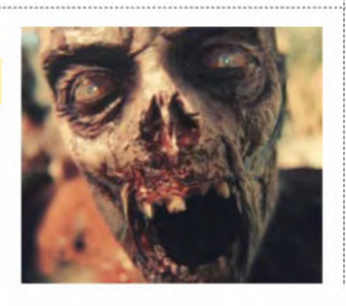


IT'S BEEN five years since the last major *Prince Of Persia* console release, so we thought chances were good for a return. However, finding the right way to release this series with much of its thunder lost to *Assassin's Creed* remains a challenge.

RIME

SONY DIDN'T play up its indie line-up too hard this year, save for some Devolver games, and *The Last Guardian* probably would have overshadowed it rather badly so it's probably for the best that *Rime* took a step back.

DEAD ISLAND 2



REVEALED LAST year, everything has gone deathly quiet on the *Dead Island 2* front. While the development team behind it looks solid, very little is being revealed about the game at the moment and that's a worry to us.

NEW CRITERION EXTREME RACER

SO, HAVING given the *Need For Speed* series a new lease of life and started development on a new IP, we thought Criterion would be showing off something fresh for EA this year. It would seem more work is still to be done on the project.



INDIE SURVIVAL HIT DON'T STARVE HAS BEEN CONFIRMED FOR RELEASE ON XBOX ONE

(THIS IS HOW YOU DO TRIPLE-A)

CD Projekt Red's Masterplan

It's been a few weeks since *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt* launched, so we took some time away from playing Gwent and exploring the brutal lands of Skellige to talk to Damien Monnier – senior games designer at CD Projekt Red – about how the team reacted to the game's launch, and how they plan to keep *The Witcher III* alive for years to come…

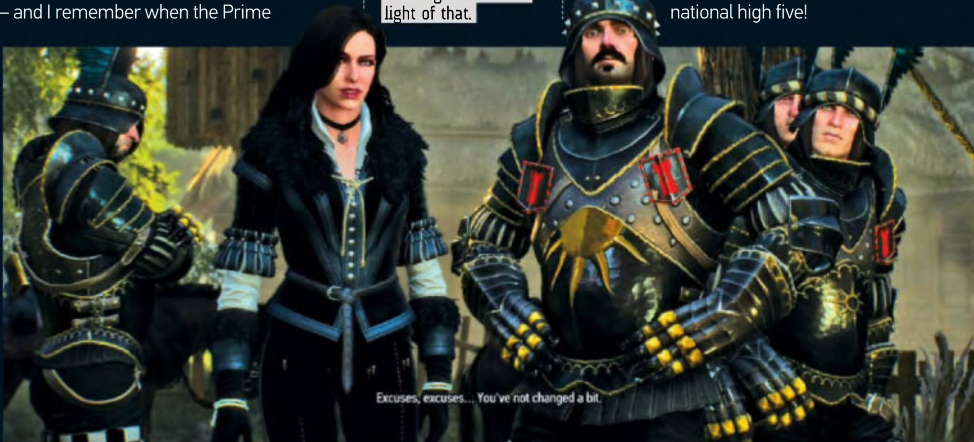
The Witcher III's launch has been spectacular – is it living up to the hopes you had for the title, or doing better than you'd expected?
I did not expect that at all. Personally, as an RPG fan, I knew that I really enjoyed playing *The Witcher III* during production (I am still playing it at home, actually) so I was hoping that I wasn't the only one. When you are a game dev, your goal is always to create something that will bring a lot of entertainment to people; that's what games are all about really, just having fun.

We still get messages, daily, from fans who say that they had never heard of the *Witcher* series before picking up *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt* and are having a blast playing it and exploring it. Very humbling and motivating for us to do work harder.

→ The Witcher III showed everyone how to release a game in 2015 – beating the big boys and proving to the world there's more growth in the triple-A market yet to come

CDPR is responsible for one of Poland's largest cultural exports - even receiving a visit from the Prime Minister when the game launched. You must be incredibly proud of that.
I am an expat originally, Poland is my new home – it has been for a few years now – and I remember when the Prime Minister came to the office I looked around, everybody was poker-faced, and I said to a colleague, "In the Eighties, I told my parents I wanted to make games, and they told me to get a real job. Now your Prime Minister is right here telling us that games are cool. Is this real life?" Everybody was really proud, I think it was all a bit surreal, hence the poker faces.

The next day, the President of Poland invited the company's founders for a chat. Surreal. I am super proud of everybody and getting messages from other Polish companies (not just in the games industry) is very nice and humbling, it's like a national high five!



Below CD Projekt Red has proved itself as one of the best developers in the world with *The Witcher III*, and we look forward to seeing the studio grow more in light of that.


DWAYNE 'THE ROCK' JOHNSON IS SET TO STAR IN A FILM ADAPTATION OF ARCADE CLASSIC RAMPAGE



Inset We look forward to seeing if there'll be any more Ciri-based missions – the time/space altering aspects of her gameplay seem like experiments for *Cyberpunk 2077*.





> "If it is cool and we can do it, we will. It's really refreshing as a developer to have this freedom"
>
> Damien Monnier, CD Projekt Red

Some commentators are saying that 'it's the benchmark to which all RPGs [this generation] will be judged'. Was that what you were aiming for?
It was our goal to make our own benchmark and say "Okay – this is the level of quest design we should always produce", for example. Same with the writing, the exploration, the organic living world and so on. It was our first open world and RPG on this scale so we had to try a few things and really set our own bar.

If other companies want to pick some elements from *Wild Hunt* that they believe would work in their RPG, go ahead, and if they improve on it then that's even better; it helps the RPG genre evolve, so that's a good thing!

Your DLC practices are unprecedented in the industry: 16 free packs for anyone buying the game is an ambitious move. What was the thought process behind this?
To be honest, it's pretty straightforward: our goal is always to keep supporting *Wild Hunt* because we also see it as a way to thank people who helped us and supported us; so when our studio director Adam Badowski or our co-founder Marcin Iwiński asks the team what we think of doing 16 free DLCs, as gamers – and you have to remember we're all gamers here – it's a no-brainer. We unanimously said "Let's do it". So we just did it. That's often how things are done here "Wouldn't it be cool if..." and if it is cool and we can do it, we will. It's really refreshing as a developer to have this freedom.

CDPR has always operated on a very open, very honest basis with its consumers – why do you think this is important?
I think being open, about positives and negatives, shows respect towards our fans. We absolutely depend on fans; without their support we are nothing, so we need to be honest. Many times our co-founder Marcin Iwiński has gone online and explained to the fans what our train of thought was regarding various things; it's always genuine and I am proud to work with people who are really open. Personally that's how I'd like companies to speak to me as a gamer – thankfully this is becoming more and more of a thing, especially with indie companies, and I am glad.

Do you have any plans – other than the DLC packs – to keep *The Witcher III* alive over the rest of the year?
Absolutely! We have two super cool expansions – *Hearts Of Stone* and *Blood And Wine*, one this fall, the other Q1 2016. We are supporting *The Witcher III* all the way, so we have a lot of really impressive stuff coming up, lots of ideas from the team that we are able to execute thanks to the support of the people who purchased the game – it means we can pay the bills and keep making cool stuff!

"IT GWENT BETTER THAN EXPECTED"

■ "We fancied doing something new as a mini game, something that worked well with *Wild Hunt* and wasn't totally detached," Monnier explains when we ask him about the game's rampantly popular mini-game, Gwent. "There is a small reference in the *Witcher* books of a game called Gwent, that describes it as a card game of two armies clashing. Already we had a start and on top of that I was given limitations such as the time it should take to play a game of Gwent (no more than ten minutes maximum).

"Rafał Jaki, my friend who worked on it with me, plays a lot of physical card games like I do but the inspiration for this came mostly from board games. We knew that to keep it short and sweet we had to keep the base layer simple and then add more and more to it without losing this simple strategic aspect, so it is a game about having a number higher than your opponent with a pre-determined number of cards, and two to three rounds to spend those cards. It's as simple as that, then on top of it you add rules and cards that each can break a rule as well as a tactical side. That's more or less it.

"We printed a load of cards during the prototyping phase with Rafał and we played a lot, that helped us spot what worked and what didn't work from the size of the starting hand to the number of rounds, to some special abilities that never made it to the game. Then, when the rest of the team got into it, we also spotted what people really enjoyed about it and focused on those elements.

"At the end of the day, whilst it got our full attention and we did the best mini-game we could, it is still a mini-game and we never expected people to mention it during reviews or on forums, let alone print their own cards so that they could play at home. It's the biggest compliment ever. It... Gwent better than expected."

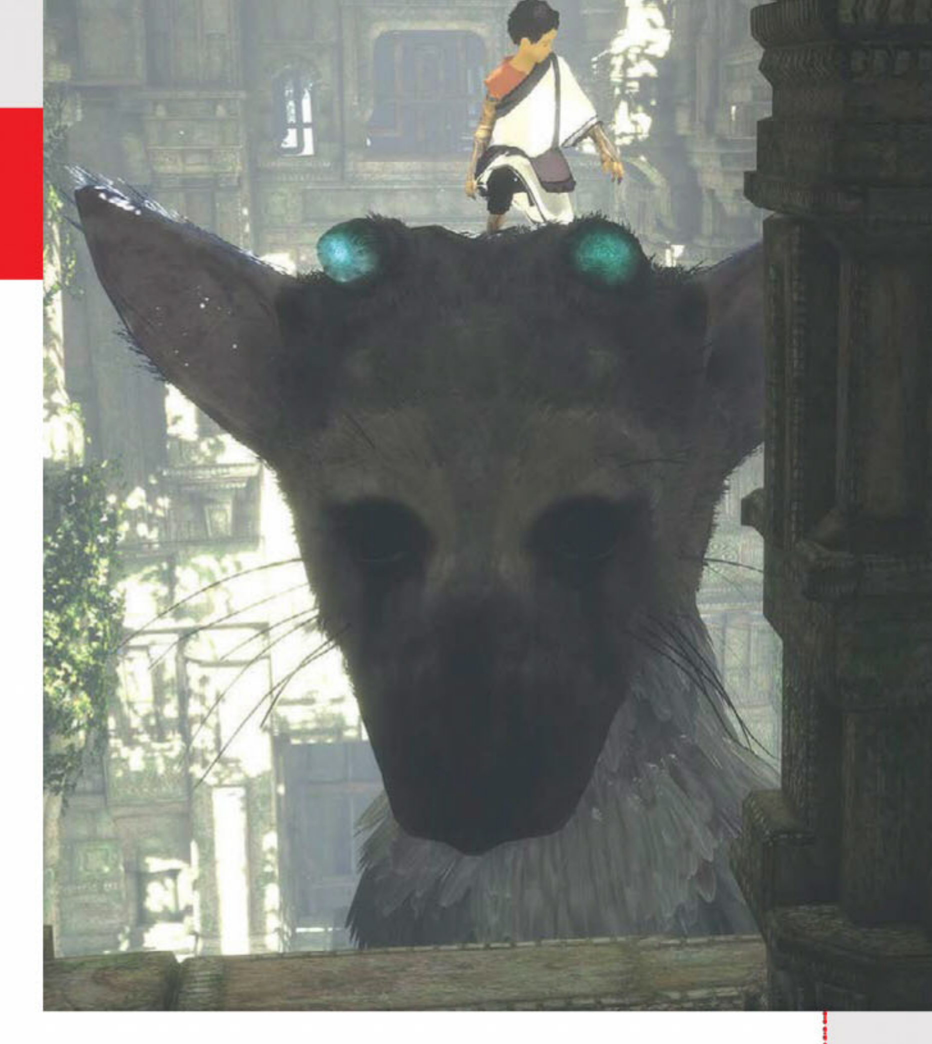





QUANTIC DREAM'S HEAVY RAIN AND BEYOND: TWO SOULS WILL BE GETTING A RE-RELEASE ON PS4 IN EUROPE

KONGETSU

BACK IN THE GAME



How Japan got its groove back



Many people have been wondering for a while why Japan hasn't been all that involved in this new generation of consoles. Then, all at once, the answers came – silos one, two and three were opened within moments of one another, revealing *The Last Guardian*, *Shenmue III* and the much-rumoured *Final Fantasy VII Remake* to be real things in scenes the internet simply wasn't ready for. It's okay for the stars of Japanese development to disappear for years at a time, so long as they come back granting wishes, right? Right.

Every big E3 surprise this year came from a Japanese team. *Doom* and *Dishonoured II* had both been teased months before, and the same can be said of more or less every western reveal. *Gears* remake? Obviously. New one, too? Well, yeah. *Uncharted* still looks good? OF COURSE IT BLOODY DOES. The odds you would have got on those things wouldn't have given you enough of a return to buy a stick of gum. But *The Last Guardian and Shenmue III* within minutes? You could have earned enough to buy out the entire Wrigley's brand on that kind of outside bet. And the surprises weren't even kept to the mainstream, oh no – Square brought news of a new *Star Ocean* and a completely unexpected *Nier* sequel, for instance, while Bandai Namco and Atlus had the expected roster of colourful new fan service anime games.

While we might see this influx of new Japanese hotness as a boon for the western market, it's perhaps more important (and less selfish) to consider the ramifications it stands to have on Japan's own gaming scene. Uptake of new consoles has been slow, but you better believe that PS4 sales will spike massively for each of the Sony conference highlights and more besides. A couple of high-profile releases should be enough to truly see in the new generation – *Persona 5* and *Dragon's Dogma Online* coming this year will help set the stage before the deluge truly begins next year. And that's good for everyone. Wider acceptance of new hardware will push even more devs onto the more powerful systems and while it's been a long time coming, it seems as though the global games market is finally on the same page.

Another key trend is the incredible trust being placed in Platinum Games, developing a new *Transformers* game for Activision as well as working on *Nier*, *Star Fox Zero* with Nintendo and *Scalebound* for Microsoft. This upstart Japanese development house has become a trusted production studio.

> Every big E3 surprise this year came from a Japanese team

Dark Souls III. *Kingdom Hearts III*. *Final Fantasy XV*. The list of killer Japanese games in development for our new favourite consoles is already impressive, and it's only going to grow more so as the PS4 sweeps its home nation. If nothing else, the games industry could be doing no more than this to gain the attention and interest of Japanese gamers and if this line-up of titles isn't enough then the move away from console game development in the East may be the only option left for a lot of major game makers. My body is ready, but I have an awful feeling that my wallet is not.

Luke Albigés is Editor of **Play** magazine and would have put money on *The Last Guardian* being vapourware until a few weeks ago…



● This digital age means that getting hold of an import title is easier than ever but the fact that we don't have anything close to confirmation that this *Dragon's Dogma* sequel will get a localisation is a crying shame. Dry those tears, however, and get in on the Japanese release – it's F2P and we'd be surprised if Capcom do a translation, so you might as well get in early and let similarly-minded importers guide you.



ROOM WITH A VIEW

With The Chinese Room's Dan Pinchbeck

The State Of The Art

Amongst the chaos of E3, I managed to grab a coffee with an old friend, Pietro Riva of Santa Ragione (*Fotonica*, *Mirror Moon*), who is a great designer and Very Smart Bloke, and chewed the fat over how increasingly difficult it is to find traction for experimental games on Steam. Back in 2012 when we launched *Dear Esther*, we had three things going for us.

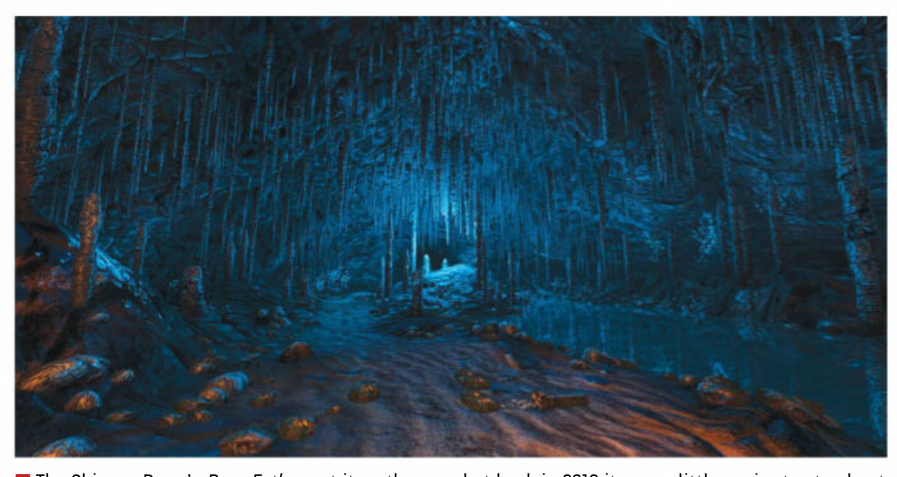
Firstly, it just resonated with players and the word of mouth around the game was huge – in part due to the love of the 2007 mod amongst the mod community (which meant we knew we had something that wasn't just for art-gamers, whoever they might be, but was loved by a large number of FPS players too). Secondly, Valve loved it, and it was built on its engine, coming out of its mod community, so it made sure it got front page profiling – the holy grail of being on Steam. Thirdly, there was just less on Steam overall, and certainly nothing like *Esther*. We stuck out like a depressing, incomprehensible, slow-moving thumb.

Those days are gone. Getting seen on Steam is now more important than ever, as the sheer volume of titles continues to swell, and the pressure of Early Access and community curation certainly doesn't seem to play in favour of more experimental games. There's a very definite sense that the initial glory wave of arthouse gaming has passed, the bar has been raised, and it's difficult to stand out. For a studio as established as Tale of Tales [creators of *Sunset*] – despite whether or not their games are your taste – to only manage to sell a few thousand units is quite scary.

> For a studio as established as Tale of Tales – despite whether or not their games are your taste – to only manage to sell a few thousand units is quite scary

By the time this is published, it will be clear whether *Her Story*'s online adoration has translated into cold hard cash, but it's sitting on the Steam front page as a Top Seller as I write this, so indications are good. So the audience and the appetite is there; we're still interested in trying out new things, paying to support experimentation and innovation as a community, and it's important to remember that amongst the many issues we still face. In the wake of *Sunset*, there have been calls to explore different models of funding to support experimental games, government subsidies, even demands that bigger companies offer something not a million miles away from patronage. I'm not sure how I feel about this. I've always been a little wary of KickStarter and Patreon (particularly Patreon, but that might just be the people that are on Patreon) but the competition to get a slice of the action within the open market is definitely toughening up. Equally, both *Dear Esther* and *Everybody's Gone To The Rapture* received prototyping funds from the Arts & Humanities Research Council, so we've been lucky enough to succeed in both the subsidy sector and the open market.

But I still love the fact that as an industry and community, we fund our own art. That has always given me real optimism for the future of gaming, and I'd hate to see it ghettoised through public subsidy. Nobody ever said all games should be like *Dear Esther*, or *Sunset* or *Her Story*. No-one is going to take away our robot dinosaurs any time soon (god, I hope not because, you know, ROBOT DINOSAURS!). But we have a responsibility as a community to understand that the interplay between mainstream and experimental is a critical part of games and we all have a responsibility to support it financially, or we risk more than the occasional studio closing. Experimentation is the lifeblood of gaming.



■ The Chinese Room's *Dear Esther* got it on the map, but back in 2012 it was a little easier to stand out from the rest of the indie crowd than it has become now.

Dan Pinchbeck is the creative director at The Chinese Room, currently working on Everybody's Gone To The Rapture. His views aren't necessarily representative of **games™**

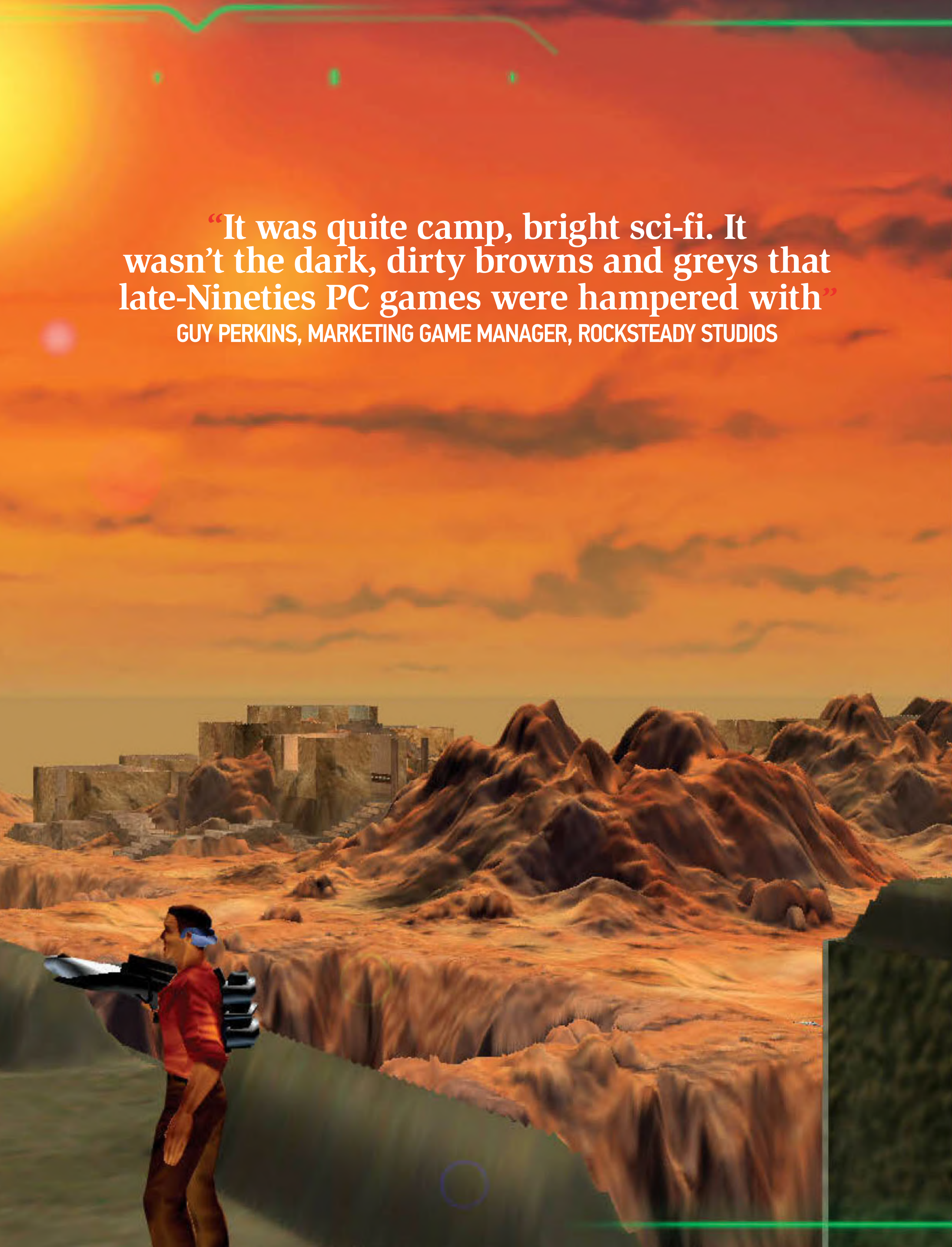


WHY I ♥...

OUTCAST

GUY PERKINS, MARKETING GAME MANAGER, ROCKSTEADY STUDIOS

“Back in the day, I loved Outcast*, because it was one of the first massively open-world games. I know it was built on shonky voxel technology and you needed an absolute beast of a PC to run it, but it just has this kind of fantastical story. Cutter Slade! What a great name for a lead character. It just felt different, it felt fresh. It was quite camp, bright sci-fi. It wasn’t the dark, dirty browns and greys that late-Nineties PC games were hampered with, like the* Dooms *and* Quakes*... As much as they were great games, that colour palette felt a little bit depressing towards the end, and so* Outcast *was that very bright, glorious, other-worldly experience. It was fully voice-acted. It just worked. It was a really nice experience.”*



"It was quite camp, bright sci-fi. It wasn't the dark, dirty browns and greys that late-Nineties PC games were hampered with"

GUY PERKINS, MARKETING GAME MANAGER, ROCKSTEADY STUDIOS


100 HOTTEST NEW GAMES
100 HOTTEST NEW GAMES
Plus the stunning new tech and visionary developers who are revolutionising gaming
FALLOUT 4
HALO 5
GHOST RECON
HITMAN
GUARDIANS
SHENMUE III
UNCHARTED4
GEARS OF WAR 4
BATTLEFRONT
HORIZON: ZERO DAWN
JUST CAUSE 3
RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER
MASS EFFECT ANDROMEDA
FFVII
FOR HONOR
THE LAST GUARDIAN
54
69
56
65
67

FALLOUT 4

A wicked smart evolution

1

DETAILS
FORMAT PS4, XBOX ONE, PC
ORIGIN USA
PUBLISHER BETHESDA SOFWORKS
DEVELOPER BETHESDA GAME STUDIOS
RELEASE 10 NOV 2015
PLAYERS 1

■ THIS IS EVOLUTION. This is expansion. For the last seven years, Bethesda has been constructing a sequel to *Fallout 3* worthy of the name. By building on both its spectacle and intricate detail, *Fallout 4* is looking like a real crowd-pleaser. A game with enough bang for its buck to wow the masses and enough small detail and fan service to keep the true believers and wannabe vault dwellers content. Such an equation has clearly taken a very long time to perfect and waiting has meant that what we see now is pretty close to a final product. Simply put, we're impressed.

Let's talk about the spectacle. Amazing new hardware customisation that means you can call in a Vertibird and fly around Boston with a turret gun, jet packs on your power armour, what look like Thunderdome style battle arenas, stunning new VATs kills for slow-motion gore and destruction and what might even be a weapon that fires from near-earth orbit. The hints are just as tantalising as the confirmed details.

Start to break this down and it only gets more impressive. Customisation is at the heart of this new *Fallout* and while picking your preferred weapons, keeping them in good working order and generally developing a preferred playstyle with your selection of perks have always been important to this series, we're seeing it extend far beyond that now. For instance, of the 50 weapons available in the game there are 700 modifications you can make to them. The examples we've see show laser pistols being turned into scattering laser rifles or hunting rifles turned into tactical sniper rifles. With the ability to change the barrel, grip, stock, sights, muzzle and capacitor on each weapon, you could create a unique arsenal without too much trouble.

And these customisations can be made from anything in the world. Different combinations of objects you find can be brought together to give you the key components you need to craft a new upgrade. As Bethesda itself has put it: it makes all that random loot you scavenge in the wasteland actually worth something to you in the long run. Find a doll or a roll of tape? That might be the beginnings of a scope you really need to add to your rifle if you're going to get past a gang of raiders. Mix and match the right objects and all manner of new tools might be made available to you. It's a little bonkers, but that's the end of the world for you. It can do funny things.

And customisation extends somewhat to your armour too. At the moment it doesn't look at if there's quite the level of power armour customisation and modding available as we've seen with the weapons, but it remains impressive with each arm, each leg, the torso and head all being allocated parts separately with any combination of classic Enclave or Brotherhood Of Steel plating. Watching these parts get switched around in the gameplay we've seen is a bit like being taken through the history of the *Fallout* series itself with a range of armour detail that recalls the iconic weaponry of each *Fallout* title. Perhaps a little more interesting is that even »



■ Above Watching the character customisation options in action was a particular thrill. While the conceit of the birth and standardised testing in *Fallout 3* was a lot more fun, the variety of options available is pretty staggering. It's also the same system that Bethesda uses to build the NPCs.


100 HOTTEST NEW GAMES
"BREAK THIS DOWN AND IT ONLY GETS MORE IMPRESSIVE. CUSTOMISATION IS AT THE HEART OF THIS NEW FALLOUT"



A REAL PIP-BOY

■ One of the more exciting announcements for fans of the *Fallout* franchise was the reveal of the Pip-Boy edition of *Fallout 4*, which includes a lifesize Pip-Boy you can wear. All you need to do is slide in your smartphone (and apparently it will come with foam inserts to cater most devices) with the downloaded second screen app and now you have a working touchscreen Pip-Boy on your wrist that will work with your in-game stats, map and other info. It's yet another level of immersion that fans of this series should love and even if you don't have the Pip-Boy you can still enjoy the app if you want to.

» basic armour can now be layered, allowing you to build a light armour for yourself not unlike a *Mad Max* outfit, cobbling together pads and plates to give you protection in the wasteland. This is a logical evolution of the looting and resource gathering that has been at the core of this game for a long time of course, developing with the knowledge that we're living in a post-*Minecraft* world where we generally know how this sort of thing works now. Crafting is a mainstream activity and *Fallout 4* can embrace that.

But Bethesda has always made a big deal of the idea that *Fallout* is a game that should let you play it the way you want to. That you should be able to explore it and live it to your own liking. A focus on combat through gun customisation and VATs rather dictates a certain way of playing you would think. It pushes you into exploration and confrontation, but that's all changing with *Fallout 4* and that excites us greatly. The addition of settlement creation – essentially a reason to go against the natural instinct of most survival games that force you out into the world and ask you to stand your ground somewhere – promises to be a major, new, and completely optional addition to the franchise. As you scrap materials you find in the world and rebuild shelters in designated areas you will attract other survivors to your area. Stalls will bring merchants who will trade their goods. Defences can be set up to deter raiders and beasts. And whole networks of resources can be arranged to bring light, water and crops to your small town.

Bethesda has teased the degree to which some of this can be customised, with a focus on the way control stations can be used to adjust things like the colour of light panels, allowing you to create your own signage. But how big could your little settlement actually get? Would we be able to make our own Nuketown if we wanted? Could we build mansions out of scrap and defend it against anyone? It's a joyous thing to ponder; it brings imagination and creativity to *Fallout 4* from the players, where before we have always had to hope for the creativity of the developer to deliver our experience.





■ Below There had been some concern over the graphical fidelity of *Fallout 4* at its initial reveal, but seeing the game live has put most of that to rest. It's not ground-breaking visually, but it's impressive for the scale of the world.



■ Left *Fallout 4* is packed with pleasing fan service, but one bit of news that is set to elate Xbox One players is that PC mods will be transferable and playable on their console, a big plus for the modding world on consoles.



At this point we can't help but think of this as being a little like *Terraria* or perhaps the end of the world version of *Viva Piñata*. You get a little segment of a decimated Boston to call your own and on it you build a settlement fit for human occupation. Build the right things and new people will come to visit, gradually turning your patch of dirt into a new civilisation, and who knows what that might bring in the days and weeks it takes for that to happen? So, where once survival in *Fallout* was not unlike living as a shark who had to keep moving or it would die, now you

> "NOW YOU CAN SURVIVE IN A MUCH MORE HUMAN, LOGICAL WAY, BY BUILDING A COMMUNITY"

can survive in a much more logical, human way by building a community, creating a new home and gradually building a life for yourself. Whether or not that's really something that can last for long will be interesting to discover.

But we can't help but go back to that first moment, emerging from Vault 111 and standing with the ruins of what was once your home town around you with a literal 360 degree expanse to walk into. There's no obvious path ahead of you, no clear marker of what might be in your way 100 yards in any direction. Heading back to your original home makes a degree of sense (and now we know we can find our old robot butler there), but we won't have to. We could literally walk in any direction we liked and see what happens. That moment really epitomises the philosophy of this series and once again shows a developer in full command of its IP's core tenets. There's crafting, and building, and looting, and killing, and talking to be done, but you don't *have* to do any of it. Self preservation may ultimately dictate your actions from time to time, but in *Fallout 4* everything is pointing to a more freeform, more personalised experience.

So yes, we're impressed. Bethesda has been keeping this game very close to its chest for a long time. While we bashed at the gates, demanding answers, as rumours swirled and false prophecies heralded the arrival of this sequel, it sat silent. It just kept building and expanding and developing this. And in keeping quiet for so long it has managed to release to us a mass of information spanning just about every question and query we could ask it to answer. We've been waiting for Bethesda's sequel to *Fallout 3* for a very long time, but the wait appears to have been worthwhile, and it won't need to last much longer. *Fallout 4* is delivering shock, awe and the promise of a truly incredible new adventure in the wasteland.

■ **Above** Bethesda has announced a mass of content and gameplay, but the pure joy of exploration is yet to be fully revealed. That leaves much of *Fallout 4*'s real strength for us to find in the near future.





■ **Above** Bethesda began development on this new title immediately after the close of *Fallout 3*, although it's been in 'full' development for the last four years after most of the team finished *Skyrim*.

FALLOUT SHELTER

■ If you haven't already, we highly recommend you check out *Fallout Shelter*, the free iOS and Android app that lets you create and control your own Vault as an Overseer. It's quite a lot like a lot of other building and city management games on mobile devices like *Tiny Tower* or *FTL*. We've been playing it pretty much from the moment it became available and it's really rather good. It's all pretty simple as resource management goes, but the added value of the *Fallout* theme to the game brings a lot to the table with invading raiders and roach attacks livening things up. Getting to send vault-dwellers out on the occasional mission has its appeal too, tracking their progress and hoping they make it back in one piece with rewards. Anyway, it's incredibly smooth and a lot of fun, so if this is any indication, the second screen app in the works for *Fallout 4* should be a fine piece of work too.





2

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT

HALO 5 GUARDIANS

LOCKE AND LOAD, SPARTANS

FIRETEAM OSIRIS

LEAD INTO BATTLE by Commander Locke, Osiris will be the polar force to Chief's own 'Blue Team'. As of *Halo 5*, Locke is promoted to a Spartan (a rare and significant promotion in current *Halo* lore), but that alone isn't enough for Locke to hunt down the AWOL Chief – no, for that task, the UNSC has constructed a team of specialists, and bound them together under the banner of Fireteam Osiris.

JAMESON LOCKE

1 Locke's illustrious career really began to hit its stride when he was made Acquisitions officer over at the Office Of Naval Intelligence (or ONI, for short). The UNSC brought him on-board to track down Chief – Locke has a long-running reputation for being the best man-hunter in operation, and despite his admiration for Chief, a mission is a mission, and Locke can't turn down the opportunity to lead his own team into battle.

HOLLY TANAKA

2 Holly's actually been a greater part of *Halo* lore since she was introduced in Dark Horse's on-going comic tie-in (*Halo: Escalation*). She's one of ten survivors of a Covenant raid on her home planet of Minab – she lived through a three-year nuclear holocaust on the planet's surface before the UNSC rescued her. She signed up for the fight straight away, enjoying physical augmentation to become one of the new-fangled Spartan-IVs Locke has recruited to his team.

OLYMPIA VALE

3 The team's linguist and communications officer, Olympia Vale made a name for herself after the Covenant War was over, and humanity needed help bridging the language barrier between themselves and the alien race. Able to communicate in various Covenant dialects, Vale's story is told in full in the recently released tie-in novel, *Halo: Hunters In The Dark* – her first appearance in the series' lore.

EDWARD BUCK

4 *Halo* loyalists might remember Nathan Fillion's character from *Halo: ODST* where he helped lead a team of the titular Orbital Drop Shock Troopers on a covert mission through a Covenant-occupied New Mombasa. During the events of *Halo 3: ODST*, one of his ill-fated team members stated 'if [Buck] was any better, he'd be a Spartan'. Well, in the years that have passed since Earth's occupation, Buck certainly seems to have gotten better – now donning the armour of a Spartan-IV, albeit with his old-school ODST helmet for nostalgia's sake.

DETAILS
FORMAT XBOX ONE
ORIGIN USA
PUBLISHER MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS
DEVELOPER 343 INDUSTRIES
RELEASE 27 OCTOBER 2015
PLAYERS 1-24

BLUE TEAM

UNLIKE THEIR SPARTAN-IV counterparts, this team of Spartan-IIs were abducted from their families at six years old, weaponised as infants, Spartan armour grafted onto their bodies. This whole team has known each other since that age – they trained through the Spartan-II program together – and this gives them akin to a sixth sense when it comes to helping each other out in combat…

MASTER CHIEF PETTY OFFICER, JOHN-117

1 The face of *Halo*, Master Chief is considered by most of humanity as a champion of the species, dreaded by his enemies as 'the devil' and almost single-handedly won the UNSC the Covenant War. It's been eight months since Cortana went rampant in *Halo 4*, and in light of her 'death', Chief has hunted down his old class-mates and opted to go off with them on a personal mission… a decision that the UNSC is *really* not very happy with.

LIEUTENANT JUNIOR GRADE FREDERIC-104

2 The brains behind Blue Team's operation, Frederic-104 is a skilled battle strategist and commander. He's the highest-ranking member of Blue Team, but he seems to lack the heroism of the de-facto leader, John-117. Fred takes the well-being of his squad to heart, and if anyone ends up wounded or injured under his command, it's like a personal failure to him.

PETTY OFFICER LINDA-058

3 The sniper. Linda-058, like all snipers apparently, is a soldier of few words, preferring to let her one-shot kills do the talking. In the wider *Halo* lore, Linda has cropped up a few times, executing whole bands of enemies with such speed and aggression that even her teammates don't know which enemy went down first. She's even reported to have taken down a Banshee by headshotting the pilot through the vehicle's shell.

PETTY OFFICER KELLY-087

4 Chief's closest friend, according to the lore, and a Spartan that can react quicker on the battlefield than your average solider, Kelly-087 is Blue Team's recon expert. She's been reported to hit speeds of 38 miles per hour *on foot*, and has taken out countless Elite Covenant soldiers in hand-to-hand combat (yes, that means getting up close and personal with those terrifying energy swords). Blue Team uses her as 'bait', but Kelly is more than happy with that arrangement.



CAMPAIGN

WE PERSONALLY THINK that the *Halo* series hit its narrative peak with *Halo: Reach* – an emotional look at a world filled with aliens and crazy technology, but through human eyes. Playing as supersoldiers, you can often lose that stake you have in the worlds they're saving. *Halo 5* – with its two tight-knit teams of brothers and sisters – plans on recreating that emotional skew the series took on in *Reach*. It's been a *huge* influence on the development team, and we really hope it took something special from Bungie's *Halo* swansong. Since 343 is so keen on bringing comparisons back to *Halo: Reach*, that tells us that a good amount of these soldiers will inevitably die, right? We don't want that to be the case, but when you've effectively got three disposable lives per team, it means that at least *one* person from each side is going to end up staring down the barrel of a Covenant shotgun, right? If these climaxes can be carried out in the same beautifully off-hand yet impactful way as they were in *Reach*, we'll be impressed.

While your friends are alive, though, you'll be playing through the levels with them – each mission can be played in up to four-player co-op. It's drop-in, drop-out, so if a friend needs to ditch you when you're entrenched deep behind Prothean lines, don't worry: the computer AI will jump in and take over. This four-player means there's a more tactical way to approach your various firefights: hopefully the 'puzzle combat' we came to love in the first three games is back, then. We've passed off the co-operative element as an aside there, but you can't over-state how important it's been to the development of *Halo 5*'s campaign; for the first time in *Halo* history, every level has been built around the idea that you *will* be playing in a team of four – whether that's AI or people, 343 wants you to feel you're surrounded by smart, coordinated and helpful soldiers… it's the only way you'll make it out of *Halo 5*'s missions alive.

Above Players will be given some real choice on how they approach a level, head-on or stealthier.

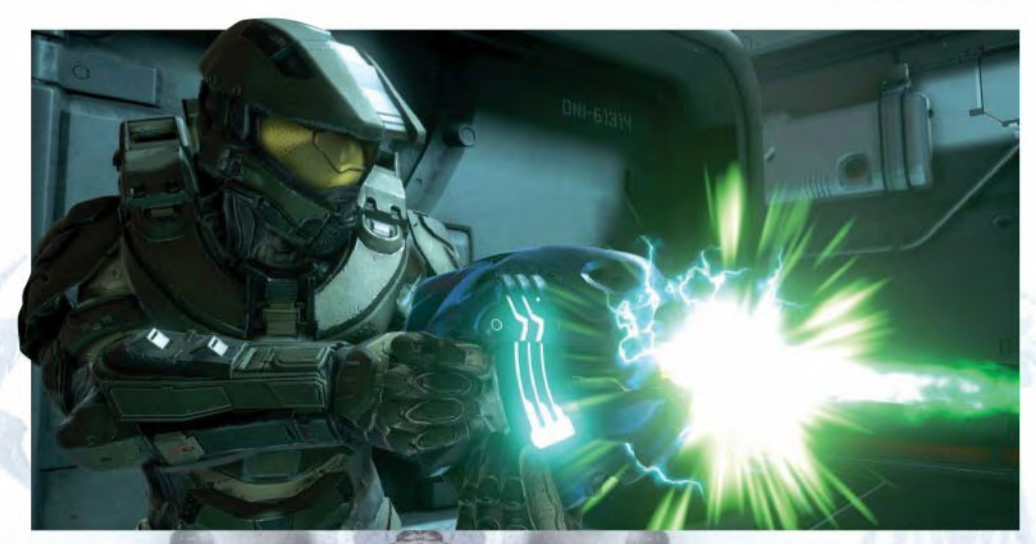






As such, there are multiple paths through each level – we imagine (and hope) this will extend to more than just a 'loud' or 'quiet' option. Maybe it'll mean we can split off from the rest of the group, assassinate an Elite manning a mounted turret and call our pals in, or maybe it means two players need to take the left hand route to an engine room whilst the remaining Spartans blast an entrenched squad of Grunts to death before they can raise the alarm? It's early days, but we're hoping for a decent amount of complexity to *Halo 5*'s level design.

Last, but not least, the story beats of the game have been constructed around the idea of co-op play, too. This means that it isn't just Master Chief/Locke's story – it's also all of Osiris and Blue team's. Each character gets at least a level (we assume) in the spotlight, so if you have to stick to playing as Tanaka or Fred, you'll get to be the star of the show. 343 really has put a lot of thought into what people want from a *Halo* game, and we're excited to see how that manifests in the campaign – after all, co-op Legendary has always been the most fun part of the series.



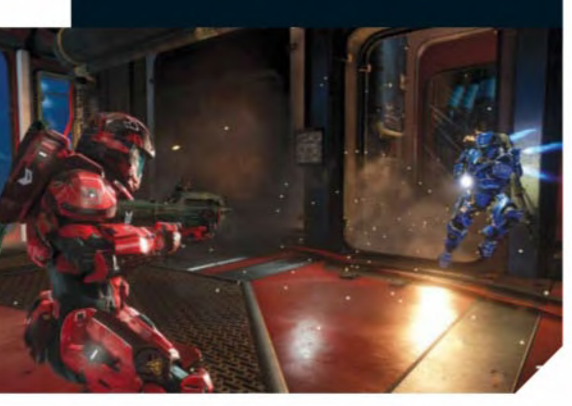


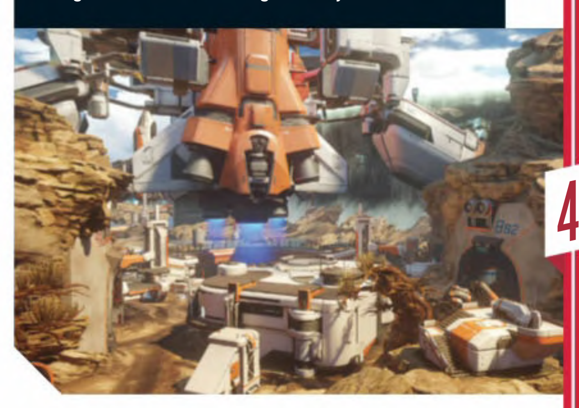
DUEL

■ After the lukewarm reception to *Halo: The Master Chief Collection* and the errors 343 seems to be making with the online portion of the game, we were cautious about what form *Halo 5*'s PvP component was going to take. After the announcement of Warzone – the newest mode – our fears have been allayed. Not totally but enough, for now. Warzone will operate a bit like *Titanfall*; a mix of PvP, PvE and everything in-between – you'll face off against enemies controlled by real people *and* AI. Each team will have roughly 24-non human enemies on their side, alongside 12 *real* players each. So that's 36-on-36 combat confirmed from the off.

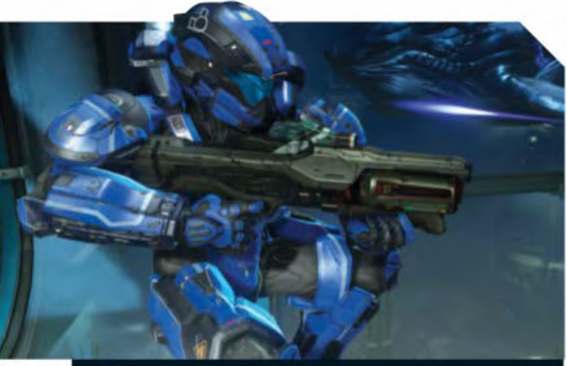
MAP DESIGN

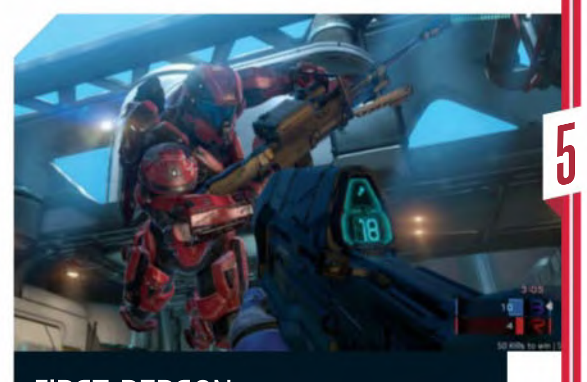
■ This, of course, means that 343 had to create bigger maps than *Halo* players will perhaps be used to – we've certainly had *huge* maps at play in games before, but they've been centred around Big Team Battles and vehicular activities, these new ones… they're different. They're sectioned off, for example – you have to take down the opposing team's AI before doors on your base will open, allowing you access to more firepower, more vehicles, more weapons. In true *Halo* form, these maps are multi-tiered and multi-routed, meaning you'll have to concoct delicate strategies to pull enemy AI onto your killing floors… while avoiding the fire yourself.





MULTIPLAYER





INTERACTIVE

■ *Halo* isn't like its genre stablemates – you don't have to grind to gain access to the best gear (well, you did a *bit* in *Halo 4* but barely enough for it to impact how well you did in a match). That's no different this time, although there is a new type of in-skirmish currency for Warzone that's paid out for completing objectives, executing rivals and getting *Halo* medals. By saving up this currency, you can call for cooler – read: more lethal – goodies whenever you spawn; you can request a better sidearm, generate a Warthog, or even grab yourself a rocket launcher, sniper or Mantis walker if you're good enough. There's even a new Prothean dropship on offer for those that are alive for long enough to summon it…

FIRST PERSON

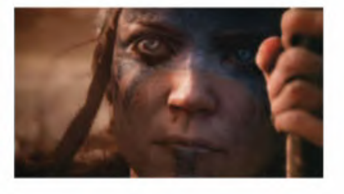
■ Thing is, unlocking all that good stuff isn't going to be as easy as calling in a UAV in *Call Of Duty* – *Halo*'s game has always been a quicker, more twitch-y affair. Those blessed with killer reflexes can command a Battle Rifle or Designated Marksman Rifle (DMR) with godly skill, whilst those more adept at raiding can drop down and assassinate players like shinobi. The new armour abilities 343 is dropping in will level the battlefield even more, and the quick-steps, the jetpack boosts and the ground-pounds that'll litter the battlefield *should* make for an experience that's both incredibly playable to the insiders, but ostensibly watchable for the eSports audience 343 is so desperate to catch.



3 STREET FIGHTER V

Release date March 2016
Developer Capcom

■ The roster continues to expand for *Street Fighter V*. Cammy plays as you'd expect – almost exactly the same as in *Ultra Street Fighter IV*. Birdie has a lot to prove. He's quite tech, but a *great* fighter once you get to grips with him.



4 BATTLEBORN

Release date TBC 2016
Developer Gearbox Software

■ *Battleborn* is a game created for co-op players: there will be five of you per team, and there are *no* duplicate characters. *Battleborn* takes the progress *Borderlands* made with PvE game design and applies it to PvP – we're down with that.

5 HELLBLADE

Release date TBC 2016
Developer Ninja Theory

■ We'll be following protagonist Senua 'down the rabbit hole' in *Hellblade*. She's suffering from psychosis, and will have to battle not only through hordes of seemingly undead Viking warriors, but her own cerebral labyrinth as well.



6 PROJECT CARS 2

Release date TBC 2016
Developer Slightly Mad Studios

■ Doesn't it seem like only five minutes ago that *Project CARS* was released? Well, it sort of was, but Slightly Mad isn't wasting any time in getting to work on a sequel promising new racing disciplines such as Rallycross and co-op navigation.

UNCHARTED 4
THE APEX OF THE NAUGHTY DOG FORMULA?

THE TEAM BEHIND THE LAST OF US IS BRINGING EVERYTHING IT'S LEARNT TO THE TABLE

DETAILS
FORMAT PS4
ORIGIN USA
PUBLISHER SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT
DEVELOPER NAUGHTY DOG
RELEASE MARCH 2016
PLAYERS 1-TBC

7

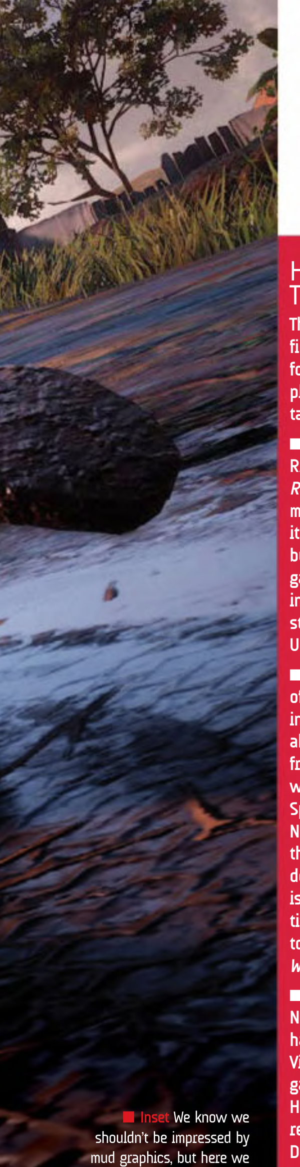
■ THE LATEST UNCHARTED 4 footage that Naughty Dog's shown off is clearly being presented as a counterpoint to its debut gameplay reveal. The developer's intentions with the first *A Thief's End* gameplay it unveiled was to show us an Uncharted that's far more open than what we've seen before. It showcased arena-like combat that contrasted starkly with the glorified corridors and enclosed spaces of past games in the series, demonstrating the possibility of a more creative approach to combat where we will be able to leverage Drake's athleticism to move swiftly around our enemies, turning the environment into a tool that's just as important as the firearm in Drake's hand. It told us that Naughty Dog is seeking to smooth out the sharp distinction between 'the jumpy bits' and the 'shooty bits', treating climbing and platforming as something that's always a part of Drake's repertoire, rather than something he does when he's done killing. It also told us that Naughty Dog has brought what it's learned from *The Last of Us* into this game. Rather than stealth being something that's over once you're spotted, here it is possible to transition in and out of the two states more fluidly, bringing enemies out of patrol patterns and manipulating them into danger by playing a game of cat and mouse.

If that gameplay was a demonstration of how *Uncharted* has evolved and how *The Last of Us* has informed the game's development, the spectacular footage that we've seen most recently is designed to remind us that those changes don't mean that Naughty Dog has



■ **Right** The role of Drake's long lost brother Sam and his motivations remain one of the game's most intriguing mysteries. We want something more interesting than a clichéd double-cross.





Inset We know we shouldn't be impressed by mud graphics, but here we are. Come on, you've got to admit that's impressive!

HEIRS TO THE THRONE

This may be Drake's final outing, but fortunately, there are plenty of contenders to take his place.

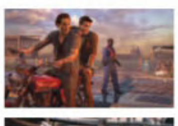
- RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER: 2013's *Tomb Raider* reboot was more *Uncharted* than it was classic Croft, but it was still a great game, and this latest instalment should still be an excellent Uncharted stopgap.
- STAR WARS: The voice of Drake let slip some interesting information about the next game from former *Uncharted* writer Amy Hennig. Speaking at Metrocon, Nolan North revealed that the game, being developed by Visceral, is an *Uncharted* style title with similarities to the cancelled *Star Wars 1313*.
- THE LAST OF US 2: North wasn't done handing out info about Visceral's *Star Wars* game at Metrocon. He also inadvertently revealed that Naughty Dog is working on a sequel to *The Last of Us*. Great news.



Above Look, henchman, Drake's done this before. There's no way this is ending well for you.

forgotten what *Uncharted* does best. To show Drake fight his way physically and realistically through those market streets before jumping into a jeep to speed down roads, over cars and across mud tracks while being pursued by an armoured vehicle and then grapple on to a moving truck to be left hanging off a bridge, is Naughty Dog saying: "We're still top of the pile when it comes to setpieces".

Then there is the graphical prowess for which the studio has become famed. It has a reputation for getting the best out of PlayStation







hardware and we have to admit, this looked a step beyond what we've come to expect from the current-generation. There's an insane level of detail in evidence, from the way that sand pours from the sandbags behind which Drake is taking cover when they are pierced by bullet fire, to the way that mud flicks in the air and cakes Drake's clothing as he's dragged through the dirt holding onto his grapple hook in the extended version of the E3 *Uncharted* footage that we got to see behind closed doors.

There's every indication, then, that *Uncharted 4* will continue to excite us with the technical excellence and directorial flair with which Uncharted setpieces have come to be associated. However, the law of diminishing returns suggests that presenting us with more setpieces with prettier graphics may not be quite enough. You can only see so many explosions, car chases and collapsing buildings before it starts to become run of the mill, however impressively those scenarios might be presented from a graphical perspective.

Our hope is that this issue will be addressed by interspersing those trademark Hollywood-esque scenarios with more open sections that call back to that original *Uncharted 4* gameplay reveal. In other words, we need more than a prettier version of *Uncharted 3*. It is the idea that Naughty Dog has adjusted combat to bring Nate's climbing skills to the fore and to give us more freedom in how we approach each encounter that gives us hope that we're going to see that. Get that mix of new and old right, nail the balance between funnelled but spectacular setpieces and sections where we're given agency, and this could just be the finale that *Uncharted* deserves.



Above We were mighty impressed by the small details as Drake made his way through the market that becomes a battleground.

"NAUGHTY DOG IS SAYING: "WE'RE STILL TOP OF THE PILE WHEN IT COMES TO SETPIECES'"



100 HOTTEST NEW GAMES
8

HORIZON: ZERO DAWN
A NEW BEGINNING FOR GUERRILLA GAMES

CAN 'THE KILLZONE TEAM' BLOSSOM IN THIS NEW WORLD?

■ THE THING THAT excites us the most about *Horizon: Zero Dawn* is the potential of its battles taking on the epic scale that a fight with the hulking metallic dinosaur-like creatures that roam the game's world warrant. In watching protagonist Aloy hunt in a future where civilisation has been reclaimed by nature, we saw our heroine employ a variety of strategies to take down the gigantic Thunderjaw. The idea that you have to accrue a hunter's knowledge in order to survive such encounters – learning an enemy's weak points, crafting the necessary tools to counter its strengths and so on, is an appealing one. Whether there's a freedom in how you choose to approach such encounters, or whether they'll lose the spectacular sheen of that first Thunderjaw battle once we realise that we've just got to repeat the same set of steps ad nauseam isn't clear. The same can be said of the game as a whole. On first showing, the spectacular visuals and technical finesse that Guerrilla is famed for impressed, sparking the imagination as to the sights we could see when we get to explore the world at large. The question is, will we find the necessary mechanical depth to accompany that graphical flair? Will a studio that's been locked into the *Killzone* franchise for over ten years prove that it can deliver with something that's completely different? It'll be dying to prove so and we sincerely hope it can.

DETAILS
FORMAT PS4
ORIGIN NETHERLANDS
PUBLISHER SCE
DEVELOPER GUERRILLA GAMES
RELEASE 2016
PLAYERS 1

NO MOUNTAIN TOO HIGH
■ That spectacular backdrop? Those mountains in the distance? They're worth paying attention to, because Guerrilla Games has indicated that if you can see it, you can go there. In exploring that huge world to harvest the biofuel you need to save the world, Guerrilla says you'll come across a diverse array of tribes with different cultures, from nomads to a tribe that lives in a great city.



ZOOLOLGY 101
■ Why there are dino-robots roaming the lands, we don't yet know. We do know something about the creatures themselves: as well as this Watcher – a creature adept at spotting danger – there are Grazers, from which you can harvest biofuel, Longnecks, which looks like a diplodocus in Starship Enterprise cosplay, the gigantic Thunderjaw and pterodactyl-like creatures called Stormbringers.



SHOCK THERAPY
■ You can craft different arrows to help you take down the creatures. There are electric arrows for stunning, explosive arrows, armour-piercing arrows and so on. By far our favourite weapon that we've seen though, is the cable launcher that you can use to tether large enemies to the ground. There's something cool about evening the odds by pulling those massive mechanical beasts down.



BACK AT YA
■ The Thunderjaw's disc launcher is a powerful weapon. So powerful that it can even destroy any cover that you might try to hide behind. Interestingly, though, it's possible to turn the Thunderjaw's own weapon against it. Aloy can shoot the disc launcher from its mount, scoop it up and rain down vengeance on its previous owner. We wonder what else we might find attached to *Horizon*'s creatures?

9



SUPER MARIO MAKER
Release date 11 September
Developer Nintendo EAD
■ With a confirmed 100 levels on the disc as well as the ability to create your own Mario stages, *Super Mario Maker* looks perfect to celebrate the series' 30th anniversary with.

10



MARIO & LUIGI: PAPER JAM
Release date TBC 2016
Developer AlphaDream Corporation
■ As a mash-up of Mario's two RPG franchises, *Mario & Luigi* joining forces with *Paper Mario* is the kind of thing only Nintendo can do. Expect it to make good use of the 2D vs 3D element.

11



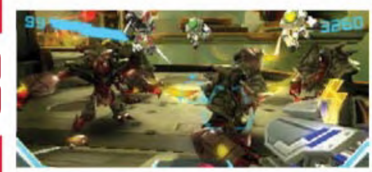
STAR FOX ZERO
Release date December 2015
Developer Nintendo EAD, Platinum Games
■ *Star Fox Zero* may well prove to be the final statement of the Wii U to justify its setup. This game likely wouldn't exist if it weren't for the gamepad bringing new ideas to the dev team.

12



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: TRI FORCE HEROES
Release date Q4 2015
Developer Nintendo EAD
■ The history of *Zelda* co-op games isn't a long one, but it's often been incredibly fun. *Tri Force Heroes* is balancing a lot here with three-player puzzle-solving, combat and 2.5D design.

13



METROID PRIME: FEDERATION FORCE
Release date TBC 2016
Developer Next Level Games
■ As a multiplayer-focused 3DS shooter, *Federation Force* isn't the game *Metroid* fans were hoping for. It is purpose-built to take advantage of the New 3DS' C-stick though.

1 GREATER EQUALITY

It's taken over 20 years, but the *FIFA* series has finally dropped its XY-only policy and brought women's football to the game. *FIFA 16* sees the introduction of international squads for women, offering the ability to play friendlies and a few tournaments with the female footballers. Player and team stats have been modified, though EA is coy as to exactly how, simply stating the women's game focuses on different attributes than the men's, but it certainly doesn't result in a sideshow attraction – this is *FIFA* as you know and love it, but now with the cream of women's football able to be controlled. About time.

14

5 WAYS **FIFA 16** IS EVOLVING

WHILE THE INSTITUTION WOBBLES, THE GAME BEARING ITS NAME THRIVES



DETAILS

FORMAT PS4, XBOX ONE, PC, PS3, XBOX 360
ORIGIN CANADA
PUBLISHER EA SPORTS
DEVELOPER IN-HOUSE
RELEASE 25 SEPT 2015
PLAYERS 1-22

2 SMARTER DEFENDING

It's one of those things that you come to realise you've seen before, when covering *FIFA* events for several years running. Such was the case when the improved locomotion was revealed for defenders – but this time, well, it certainly looks a lot better. Rather than taking a step or two too many in the wrong direction, your back line players will correct themselves, stand up from a sliding tackle or generally get back into the game much quicker than before. This and 24 other individual changes are looking to make defending in *FIFA 16* actually useful, unlike it was in *FIFA 15*.

3 READING THE GAME

Our time with *FIFA 16* showed us one thing for certain – there will be many more midfield battles than in past iterations. Attacking players, previously overpowering in their pace, haven't been slowed – midfielders have been improved to cope. Interceptions are more intelligently read, while the ability to 'pass with purpose' has been added. This method of picking out a teammate – hold L1/LB and pass – sits between the normal pass and through ball; directed with force at your fellow player, but away from the improved defenders. We didn't get the hang of it quickly, but it could be very useful.

4 GREATER STRIKER CONTROL

The up-front game in *FIFA 16* is the area that has seen the least grooming since last time around, with most work going into rebalancing the other areas of the pitch. There are still changes, however, with the biggest one being the addition of no-touch dribbling. By holding L1/LB, your player will allow the ball to run on while not taking any touches, allowing for a greater array of dummies and the like. It's not a pure attacking addition, of course, but it's something that you'll see mostly used in attacking situations. Beyond that, strikers are more aggressive in their pursuit of crosses… and that's about it.

5 IN-GAME COACHING

The new Trainer feature is something EA has worked on for a number of iterations, focus testing the help text to get everything as close to spot on as they can be from the start. What it results in is a couple of button prompts and accompanying text next to the player you're controlling, offering contextual suggestions for what you can do. These prompts change as you accomplish more in the game – for example, what starts as a straightforward cross will later become a triple-tap cross – meaning the Trainer feature can be of help to newcomers and veterans alike. Or you can just click the right stick to get rid.



Above It really feels like, this time around, EA Sports doesn't feel it necessary to add a marquee feature that affects how you play the game. Some might see this as lazy, but for some of us it provides hope the game will be more refined.

SO MANY WAYS TO KILL IN **HITMAN**

DETAILS
FORMAT PS4, XBOX ONE, PC
ORIGIN DENMARK
PUBLISHER SQUARE ENIX
DEVELOPER IO INTERACTIVE
RELEASE 8 DEC 2015
PLAYERS 1

■ AN IMPRESSIVE gameplay demo from IO Interactive has shown off the degree to which it is opening up its sandbox assassination game, and allowing us to set the terms of the kill. While *Hitman: Absolution* was enjoyable, it was actually fairly limited in its options per target. In this newly rebooted experience, the options appear to be far more varied and organic than we've experienced before. Here's a breakdown.

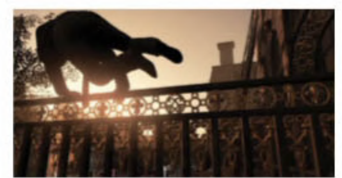
IO INTERACTIVE HAS OPENED UP THE SANDBOX EVEN MORE

15



INFILTRATE

■ Every mission begins with an open sandbox and a simple question: how do you get close enough to your target to kill them? In this instance, getting into an exclusive fashion show might be as simple as having an invite…



SNEAK

■ Or perhaps you're better off leaping over a fence and finding a route into the event other than the front door. Drawing attention to yourself is rarely a helpful way to go about completing missions in *Hitman* as the series returns to its roots.



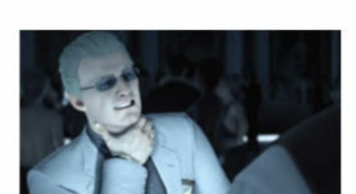
IMPERSONATE

■ A classic feature of the *Hitman* series has always been the ability to take on the clothing of NPCs in order to fool guards and others in the area. In this instance a member of the crew for the fashion event should get you pretty far.



CLOSE KILL

■ And with another costume chance into a guard's uniform (grabbing a fire axe on the way) you can get close enough to your target to remove them. Nice and simple, but perhaps there's a more elegant way that allows for escape…



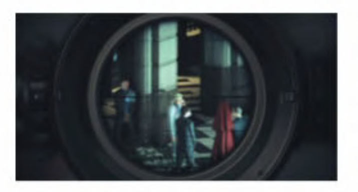
POISON

■ With a different outfit and good timing perhaps you could get Agent 47 behind the bar just in time to serve your target a drink laced with poison. A much more civilised and less conspicuous way to eliminate them.



UPGRADES

■ Successful kills lead to new abilities and hardware being unlocked, meaning you can and replay the mission again with new options suddenly available to you. Fully completing a mission means playing it over to fulfil every side objective.



OTHER WEAPONS

■ Another classic kill style; sniping from a distance will require a good vantage point and potentially a strong route of exit. Who knows what strange and lethal items might be made available to you if you search or unlock enough features?



THE ENVIRONMENT

■ And then there's the option to use the environment, whether that means drowning your victim in a toilet or rigging the elaborate fashion show scenery to fall on its benefactor. Agent 47 has so many options to choose from.

16

DETAILS
FORMAT XBOX ONE, PLAYSTATION 4, PC
ORIGIN SWEDEN
PUBLISHER UBISOFT
DEVELOPER UBISOFT MASSIVE
RELEASE 8 MARCH 2016
PLAYERS MASSIVE MULTIPLAYER

ENTER THE DARK ZONE IN

TOM CLANCY'S THE DIVISION

NO ONE CAN BE TRUSTED IN THIS NEW PVP AREA OF A DISEASE-RIDDEN NEW YORK CITY

UBISOFT MASSIVE IS apparently trying to test the boundaries of teamwork in *Tom Clancy's The Division*. The world it's created is already one of death and disease with an epidemic sweeping through the largest city in America, but we haven't really seen just how bad things are until now. The new Dark Zone areas introduced in our latest look at the game not only pit players against the environment but also against themselves, and the experience is one massive slice of tension.

The idea behind Dark Zones is simple: these areas contain the best weapons and equipment in the game and it's up to squads of three players to venture in and retrieve them. Each player receives a different piece of contaminated loot, but only that player knows the rarity and power of the item received. In order to use that item, it must be extracted from the Dark Zone and "cleansed," and then it will appear in the player's inventory.

Easy enough, right? But the problem here is more than just the environment, as any human player can turn on their squad at any time and steal whatever items they've claimed despite not actually knowing what they're stealing. We could actually trade our friends' in-game lives for a pair of common boots that we already own and not even know we're doing it all for the possibility of scoring that one ultra rare weapon.

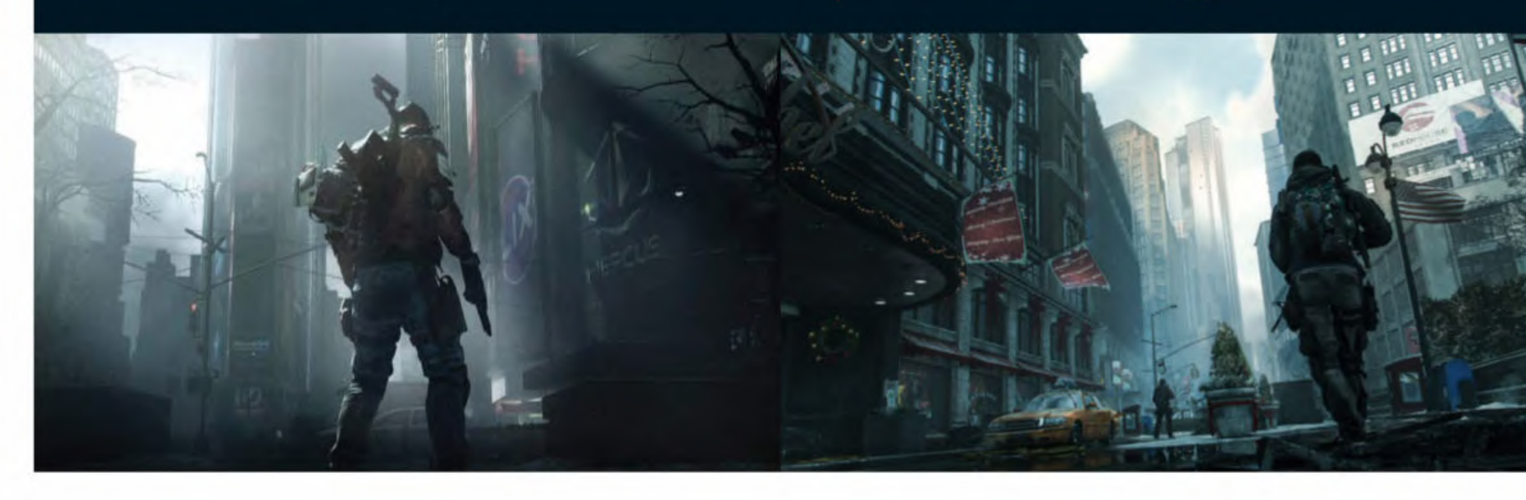
There are penalties to turning on your teammates however, including longer respawn times and the loss of any procured items. If we've locked down a great item and simply get greedy we could end up losing everything, so we really have to think about whether or not the possibility of better loot is worth the loss of great loot in hand.

This is a fascinating format, as it creates a scenario where you always have to look over your shoulders at the players standing next to you. You could be playing with friends, your best friends, or even your own parents and you won't know if they're going to shoot you in the back until the trigger is pulled. It's not just your teammates you have to worry about either, as other squads of human players will populate within the same Dark Zone and may try to steal your wares too. Nowhere and no one is safe in the Dark Zone.

With one brand new mode announcement Ubisoft has made us think completely differently about what it's chosen to title its new shooter. At first we thought it was in reference to the Division squad fighting the epidemic and the riffraff it's caused, but in the Dark Zone the "division" at play here could very well mean the rift in a solid team of players caused by the allure of rare loot. This is a devious new mode and one we're really looking forward to when *The Division* finally sees a full launch in 2016.



Above *The Division*'s take on New York City is already bleak, but the Dark Zone areas turn it into a total nightmare. With nothing to trust but your own instincts, your fingers will always need to be at the ready on the trigger.





HEROES AND VILLAINS JOIN

STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT

JUST IN CASE YOU DIDN'T THINK BATTLES ON HOTH WERE COOL ENOUGH

AS THE MUSIC swells and the AT-AT walkers bear down on the rebel base, we dare you not to feel a tingle down your spine. DICE has captured *Star Wars* magic in a bottle with *Battlefront* and now we've had the chance to see how it all comes together, we're mightily impressed. But we've got something new to talk about with the heroes and villains of *Star Wars* joining the battle. Here's what you can expect from these character-switching perks.

DETAILS
FORMAT XBOX ONE, PS4, PC
ORIGIN SWEDEN
PUBLISHER EA
DEVELOPER DICE
RELEASE 20 NOVEMBER 2015
PLAYERS 1-40

17

LUKE SKYWALKER

ARMED WITH his traditional Lightsaber, Luke can attack multiple enemies with a sweeping heavy attack that clears out Imperial forces with ease.

AT A DISTANCE, a Force push is the attack to choose as Luke musters his mastery of the ancient Jedi arts to knock Stormtroopers back and immobilise them.

AS WE'VE come to expect from those with impressive mastery of the Force, Luke can block and deflect incoming laser fire using his Lightsaber alone.

DARTH VADER

MUCH LIKE Luke, Darth Vader can clear out enemies at close range with a Lightsaber attack, although his movement is much slower than the young Jedi's.

YOU CAN Force Choke rebel scum from a distance, striking terror into the hearts of their ranks. This attack can also be combined with a Sabre Throw for crowd control.

VADER'S PRESENCE on the battlefield is pretty ominous and has an instant impact on how you feel about the balance of match as far as we're concerned.

BOBA FETT

FIGHTING ALONGSIDE the Imperial forces since they're paying his fee, Boba Fett has all his typical tech and tricks, such as a jetpack for attack from the air.

HIS WRISTBANDS allow for long and close range attacks with a rocket on one and a flame blast on the other, giving you plenty of options in the field.

BOBA FETT needs to keep things at a distance because that's where his true strength lies, plus, if he gets caught by Luke Skywalker, that could be game over.

12 HOURS IN AFGHANISTAN WITH **18**

METAL GEAR SOLID V

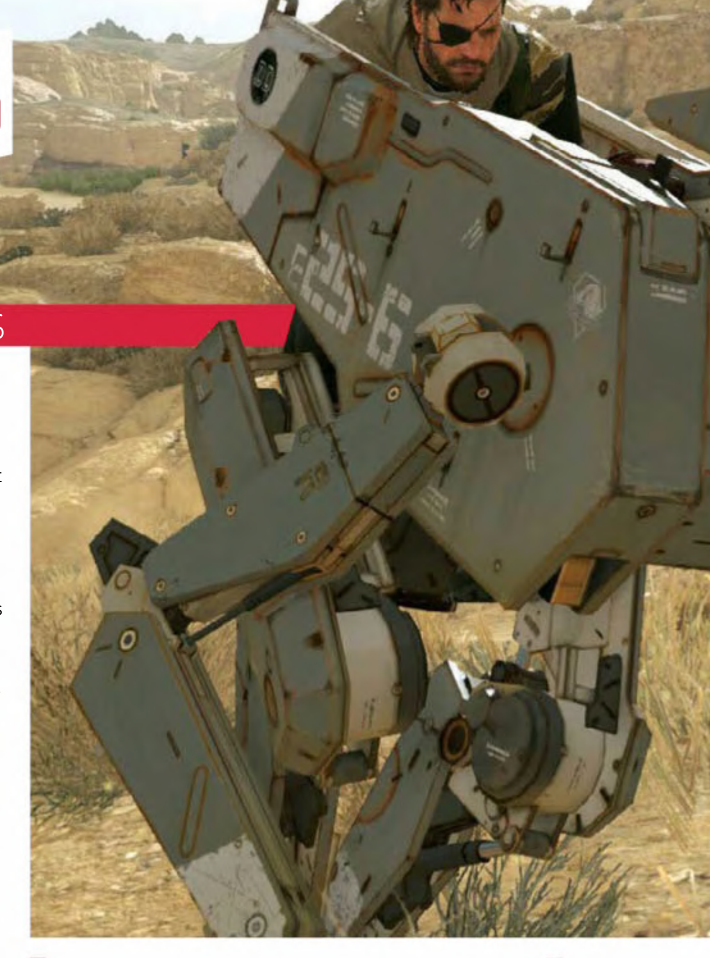
SHAPING UP TO BE KOJIMA'S MGS MAGNUM OPUS

■ AROUND EIGHT HOURS into our 12-hour stint on *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*, we were able to pull off the greatest rescue anyone has ever seen. Needing to recover a prisoner being transported by jeep and with a tank bringing up the rear for support, we raced ahead of the mini-convoy on our trusty steed, D-Horse, to see if our mad plan would work. First the C4 charges were laid – a perfect, if obvious, trap for the tank. Then came the second element – stepping forward a few metres from the explosives, Big Boss commanded the horse to do its business on the road. Puerile? Yes, of course – it fits in with the poo jokes littering all of the *Metal Gear Solid* series. But it turned out to be useful, too, as the approaching vehicles hit the trap: the jeep spun out on the faecal matter, while the tank was blown to pieces as planned. Swiftly approaching the briefly stunned driver and his copilot, we unloaded a couple of tranquiliser darts into them, slung the freed prisoner over the back of D-Horse and rode him to the rhythmic sound of the rescue chopper. *Metal Gear Solid V* will be full of great, random moments like this – plans thought up on the fly, silly little ideas that somehow make sense and end up working, assaults that go wrong for one reason before going right again for just as many other reasons.

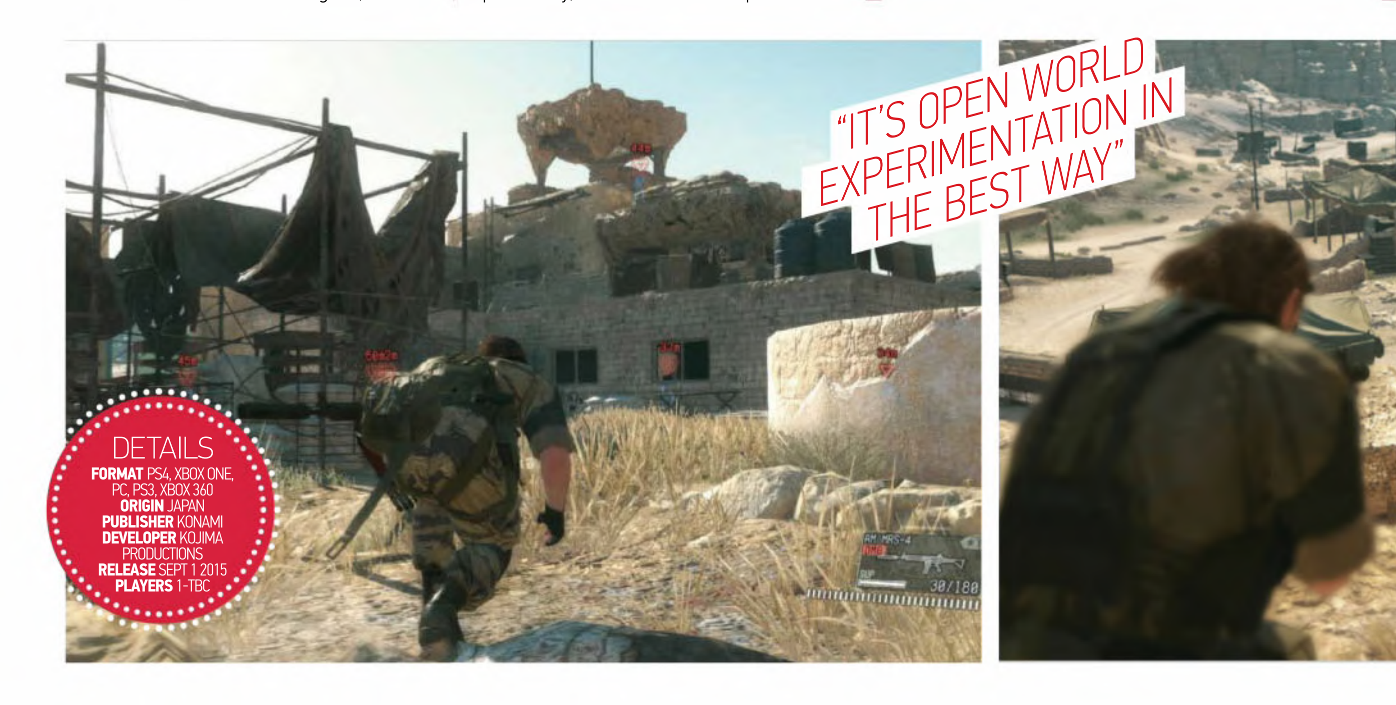
It's open world in the best way, encouraging and rewarding experimentation – and while some may understandably fear this means a watering down of what made Snake's previous adventures so great, we didn't find that to be the case at all during a dozen hours with a near-final version of the game. If anything, this has the potential to be the best *Metal Gear Solid* game of them all.

THE KOJIMA TOUCH

It's impossible to forget the little flourishes Hideo Kojima inserts into his games – they're some of the most discussed elements of videogames in general, never mind just in the *Metal Gear* series. But it still surprises and brings a smile when you're playing one of his games and that little thing – the reference, the callback, the overheard conversation – pops up. Honestly, when we heard a couple of



■ **Above** Chronologically speaking, *Metal Gear Solid V* is the first *MGS* game to see bipedal robots like this little chap (note Snake having commandeered it). Will it mean more – and bigger – robot bastards to take on? Well, that would be telling.



"IT'S OPEN WORLD EXPERIMENTATION IN THE BEST WAY"

DETAILS
FORMAT PS4, XBOX ONE, PC, PS3, XBOX 360
ORIGIN JAPAN
PUBLISHER KONAMI
DEVELOPER KOJIMA PRODUCTIONS
RELEASE SEPT 1 2015
PLAYERS 1-TBC





■ **Below** There were times during our 12 hours that we thought *MGSV* looked merely 'okay', but they soon faded away when another glorious vista made itself known, or another cutscene showed us just how detailed the characters were, or when the weather turned, or… You get the point.



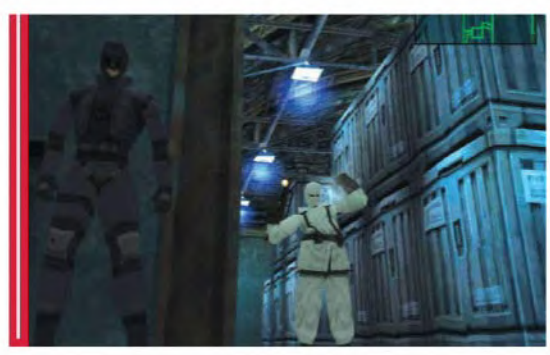
recruits on Mother Base talking about 'puppy paw pads', it was difficult not to laugh out loud.

It bleeds into the game itself, of course, not just background trimmings – the Kojima attention to detail comes in how a guard will notice a rifle on the ground, dropped by his formerly-conscious comrade; it makes for a smelly Snake emerging from his hiding spot in a bin, flanked by a swarm of flies (and able to be discovered easier thanks to his stench); it comes in the form of the utterly ludicrous boss enemies you face.

While we're not at liberty to – nor would we want to – disclose details on these enemies, it's safe to say you're facing off against a cast that wouldn't look out of place in a *Marvel* convention. Of course, they're all sure to have their (what can only be called) superpowers explained away with nanomachines and such Kojima-tastic maguffins, but that doesn't change the fact that they bring something *special* to the experience. Finding out a way to tackle the faster-than-the-eye squad of supersoldiers (hint: it's not subtle), learning to »

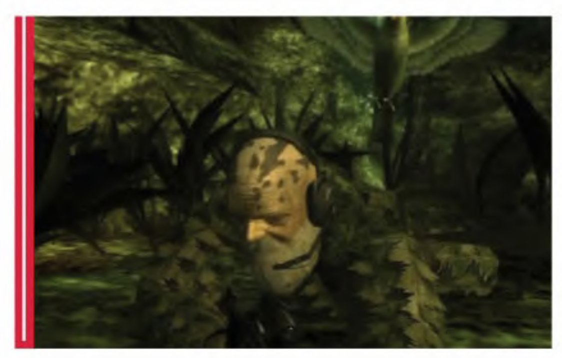
PLAY THEM WHILE YOU CAN

They're all worth a go, but here are the three *Metal Gear Solid* games you need to get up to speed on before the *Phantom Pain*



METAL GEAR SOLID

■ The original (of the *Solid* series) and still a magnificent game, it's great to go back to Solid Snake's first 3D outing and see just how much things have changed over the years. Spoiler: they've got *a lot* crazier.



METAL GEAR SOLID 3: SNAKE EATER

■ The second game was an exercise in frustrating the player through misleading them, while the third was an exercise in frustrating, then ultimately delighting the player. Still the favourite of many a fan, *Snake Eater* stands up to scrutiny to this day.



METAL GEAR SOLID: PEACE WALKER

■ The other contender for the best of the series and a huge influence on the *Phantom Pain*, the game crafted for handheld is still ridiculously compelling and good fun to play. Short missions, management elements, gorgeous interactive cutscenes – wonderful stuff.

track another sniper, wondering just what in the hell that *thing* is – it's the sort of thing we want to discuss already, and we don't even have any answers yet. It's the Kojima touch – he makes games you want to play *and* talk about endlessly.

DECISIONS, DECISIONS

What you actually do throughout *Metal Gear Solid V* is littered with these Kojima touches, though that's not to say the entire game is an in-joke from the auteur developer. Far from it – the *Phantom Pain* feels to us, so far, like one of the tightest and most focused *Metal Gear* games to date, drawing inspiration from the greats of the open world genre – *GTA*, *Red Dead Redemption*, *Far Cry* and *Just Cause*, to name but a few – and putting them through the *Metal Gear* ringer. Layering on top of it all a set of mechanics refined over almost 20 years of *Solid* titles, the near-finished product we played held together very well indeed.

It's clear that the *Phantom Pain* takes a lot of its inspiration from *Peace Walker*, and that's a very good thing indeed. The mixture of over the top action, dozens of missions, management elements and endlessly stealing soldiers (and goats, sheep and bears) for your Mother Base doesn't become dull, and the compulsive need to micromanage your team on the ocean home base is a peculiar delight we're glad to see return. It's even fun to jog around as the future evil bad guy Big Boss picking flowers and knowing that the animals you're kidnapping are actually being rescued.

See, it all works because at any time you can decide to drop your flower-picking, shoot a goat in the head with a real gun then go attack the nearest enemy outpost with an anti-aircraft emplacement (which you then steal in order to sell). The freedom is intoxicating – it

"YOU'RE FREE TO WALK, RUN OR CANTER YOUR WAY THROUGH THE MIDDLE EASTERN DESERT"





Above Making regular sorties into hostile territory, you'll learn to love your animal counterpart(s) and the role they play – not just in getting Snake from A to B, but in the other ways they can help.





Left Things won't always go to plan and you will end up having to leg it – fortunately the *Phantom Pain* caters for such cock-ups, and it's never too broken a situation to fix.





Above Scouting out a base before moving in isn't mandatory, but it's essential for those who want to successfully play stealthily.

METAL GEAR ONLINE (AGAIN)

This time around Kojima Productions won't be making the mistakes it made with *Metal Gear Solid 4*'s online mode – at least that's what we've been told. Unfortunately we didn't have a chance to take in the multiplayer, but some conclusions can be drawn from playing the offline mode – most importantly that MGO's new incarnation will play a lot more like you'd want it to, and less like the clunky mess it was on PS3. Honestly though, from our time with the game we'd be happy if we were just able to play through the main campaign with a few buddies on horseback. It'd be like *Red Dead Redemption* with more giant stompy robots. We can but dream…



really feels like the kind of game you'll struggle to get truly bored with, always attempting new ways to take out enemies, to hunt wildlife, to utilise your companions. And every step of the way, the *Phantom Pain* enables you. It's an enabler, with great possibilities.

TELL YOUR CHILDREN NOT TO WALK MY WAY

Those *Peace Walker* elements we mentioned aren't relegated to a few menu screens as they were in the PSP game. No, instead of Mother Base being just a few stills and a cutscene cameo, it's a fully explorable region of the game that offers challenges, people to chat with, vehicles to ride and an endless ocean to stare out at. You can still back out to a series of menus to manage where your recruits ply their trade – might it be combat or intel? The medical corps or support? Something else? It's all up to you, and helps you to play the game in the way you want to play it.

Alright, so it's not like an emergent RPG experience where your warrior is crafted from head to toe by the player, with all their attributes perfectly fitting the archetype the player has invented for them. No, you'll still need to pack out your R&D department to get the best gadgets and weapons, you'll still need medical staff to heal the combat troops who've been injured on duty, and you'll still need good people on support because otherwise you can't call in air support. There is a balance to be had at all times, but it's a balance that can be skewed one way or the other to cater to your playing style – make the research department top-heavy, for example, to get hold of improved Fulton extraction balloons quicker, maybe, or just pack out intel and know an enemy squad's moves on the map before even they know what they are. It's subtle, but it works.

With all of this taking place on Mother Base, it's really cool for fans of the series to be able to waddle about and take in the sea-based fortress in all its glory. It's absolutely massive, requiring a helicopter to navigate in any reasonable amount of time, and really adds to the sense of place and occasion conjured up by the story.

METAL GEAR?!

That grand nature transfers easily to the world of Snake's missions, with the Afghanistan map where most of our demo time took place absolutely dwarfing any areas seen in previous *Metal Gear Solid* games.

Best of all, it's all one big map without loading screens, meaning you're free to walk, run or canter your way through the Middle Eastern desert. So long as you try not to get caught in a sandstorm while you're picking those flowers. We do have reservations as to just how much there is to do out there in the desert – if the scale is absolutely necessary, basically – but half a day with Snake's Afghani exploration didn't put us off, so maybe we're just trying our hardest to find something to dislike about the game…

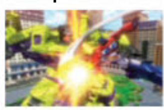
The sheer size of just the one Afghanistan map in the *Phantom Pain* fills us with a huge amount of confidence for Kojima's Snakesong, and Konami allowing us so much time – totally unrestricted – with the game so long before it's even out, shows the publisher is just as confident. Even if there have been some frosty relations between the parent company and developer, there is the small mercy that at least both sides seem happy with what has been produced. And frankly, after a 12-hour session with Snake's latest, we're inclined to agree: this is going to be something special.

It's not often we say that about a game starring a man who has a literal devil horn growing from his head, whose horse creates mess that takes out military vehicles, who looks after a dog that can murder with a knife and who enjoys picking flowers on the side. Oh, *Metal Gear*, you're so delightfully *mad*. And utterly brilliant.

19

TRANSFORMERS DEVASTATION

Release date 22 September 2015
Developer Platinum Games



This has to be the least likely Platinum Games release we could have imagined. Why would the maker of *Bayonetta* work with *Transformers*? To make something that looks insanely fun. The Cel-shaded style and fast-paced combat look absolutely excellent.

20

FORTNITE

Release date TBC 2015
Developer Epic Games

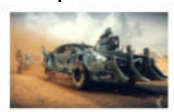


It saw its thunder stolen by the construction system in *Fallout 4*, but Epic's *Fortnite* still looks like a very cool mix of Horde mode with *Minecraft* as your team prepares during daylight for the onslaught of enemies. Get together with friends and build extravagant forts or insane weapons.

21

MAD MAX

Release date 1 September 2015
Developer Avalanche Studios



Hopefully some of the glow of *Fury Road* will still be around by the time *Mad Max* hits shelves, because it deserves the attention. This open sandbox of post-apocalyptic driving and combat seems like the perfect homage to the franchise.

22

JUST CAUSE 3

Release date 1 December 2015
Developer Avalanche Studios



While one half of Avalanche is making *Mad Max*, the other is working on this gem of a game. The action we've played so far is more insane than ever, the wingsuit works beautifully and the grappling hook is as delightful to use as you could wish.

23

FORZA MOTORSPORT 6

Release date 15 September 2015
Developer Turn 10 Studios



Still no *Gran Turismo* to be seen, but the release of *Project CARS* may have grabbed some attention at Turn 10 as weather and night driving are finally added to this follow-up to the Xbox One launch exclusive. It's looking fast, frantic and gorgeous.



THE UNTAPPED POTENTIAL OF WEARABLE TECH

GAMIFICATION IS BECOMING THE WAY OF THE WORLD

VR HEADSETS aren't the only pieces of wearable tech that can be used to enhance and augment our gaming experience. One piece of technology that's already been embraced by millions is the trend for wristbands, typically for tracking steps and used as part of health apps. But these apps have ended up gamifying our daily experiences and it's not much of an extension to see that fed back into videogames, as we found out talking to Razer CEO Tan Min-Liang.

"One of the biggest games on the planet – that a lot of [Western] gamers don't know about because it's from China – is called *We Run*," a game that links to Razer's Nabu X wristband and uses the data collected to reward you in the game. "You can buy things like distance boosts or you can buy extra lives. You know, micro-transactional stuff." While the likes of Kinect have failed to create much interest in merging fitness and games, something like a wristband has a much better chance of permeating our daily lives.

The key according to Min-Liang is that these bands can blend into our gaming experience without demanding attention. "We're working with multiple game developers to be able to game-ify life. Our tagline essentially is: 'Life is just a game'. What we want to do is to do it unobtrusively."

The fact that a company like Razer would even step into this market is an indication of its potential, something that very few have taken any advantage of yet, but which could be used to enhance a lot of other experiences. "We've been actively pushing this, together with the ISV community," Min-Liang tells us. "I'm excited. We design products for gamers, and this is one of the products I'm so excited about."

So while Razer continues to explore the pro-gaming space through its new Mamba mouse or look to open up VR development to a wider community through OSVR, the Nabu X could yet prove to be just as vital a piece of gaming kit in the future.

DETAILS
NAME RAZER NABU X
MANUFACTURER RAZER
PRICE £44.99
SITE RAZERZONE.COM
AVAILABLE OUT NOW

XBOX ONE'S

MYSTERIOUS NEW PROJECTS

24





ASHEN

XBOX GETS ITS JOURNEY

SHROUDED IN AN emotional, sometimes foreboding atmosphere, *Ashen* sounds, on the surface, like a game full of freedom and player choice. An action-RPG with a unique style and open world to explore, players can make decisions about things such as, who to bring to their nestled mountain settlement, what course of action to take when faced with one of the world's dangerous beasts and how to deal with the other players that roam the Ashen land. Who you trust is entirely up to you; choice being a big part of the experience. However, for all its emphasis on going your own way, *Ashen*'s multiplayer will be best actively interacted with, solitary game players seemingly being at a disadvantage should they feel like going it alone. According to Aurora44's Derek Bradley, "…player-to-player relationships are key to survival" in *Ashen*, and so the choice seems quite clear: make friends or you could be in trouble. As for the narrative side of things, no two games will be the same, something as small as your location at the right, or wrong, time could decide how the story goes. There will be quests, there will be a town made up of your chosen survivors and there will be combat, some of which will apparently be similar to that seen in *The Wind Waker* and *Dark Souls*; difficult battles are sure to be around many corners. An artistic and intriguing take on the action-RPG genre, Aurora44's first title has some great concepts, ones that we're very interested to see brought to life.

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RECORE

INAFUNE'S LATEST LOOKS UTTERLY BEGUILING

WHEN THE MAKERS of one of the worlds most beloved franchises teams up with the co-designer of one of the worlds most beloved characters, there's bound to be a great deal of expectation for their joint venture. Whether or not *ReCore*, an action/adventure title from the creator of *Mega Man* and the creators behind the *Metroid Prime* series, will live up to said expectations is yet to be seen, but so far the game certainly has our attention. Set in a world where humans are nearly non-existent, you play as Joule, one of the last people on the planet, a planet laden with sandstorms and angry robots. Thankfully not all the mechanical beings you meet will be hostile, some becoming companions on your mission to save mankind, ones that will be changeable. You see in this game when a buddy's outer body is demolished, their core can be put inside that of another robot shell, your bond with them continuing to exist. With new bodies presumably comes new weapons and features, an idea that suggests you'll have to constantly adapt your combat approach, how you deal with your foes altering according to the robotic arsenal by your side. It's an interesting idea, one that has a great feel of originality to it, a welcome thing in today's world of remakes and yearly franchise releases.

DETAILS
FORMAT XBOX ONE
ORIGIN JAPAN
PUBLISHER MICROSOFT STUDIOS
DEVELOPER ARMATURE STUDIO, COMCEPT INC.
RELEASE Q1 2016
PLAYERS TBC

GOING BEYOND THE FINAL FRONTIER

26

STAR CITIZEN

Release date TBC 2016
Developer Cloud Imperium Games

■ Chris Robert's intergalactic vision isn't quite as expansive as *No Man's Sky*, but damn if it isn't pretty – it's been built specifically to show off what top-end PCs can do and is only getting bigger.



27

SHADOW WARRIOR 2

Release date TBC 2016
Developer Flying Wild Hog

■ Think *Duke Nuke 'Em* in Japan. Think gratuitous bloodshed, over-the-top executions and swearing. Think fast action, tight controls and a refined art style. Think *Shadow Warrior 2*.

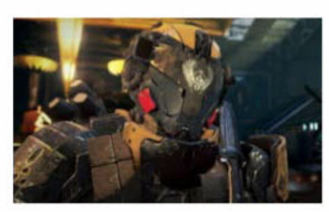


28

ANCESTORS: THE HUMANKIND ODYSSEY

Release date TBC 2016
Developer Panache Digital Games

■ One of the original creators of *Assassin's Creed* – Patrice Desilets – is making a game that follows humans from the beginning of our existence as a species. Don't expect any magic Popes here.



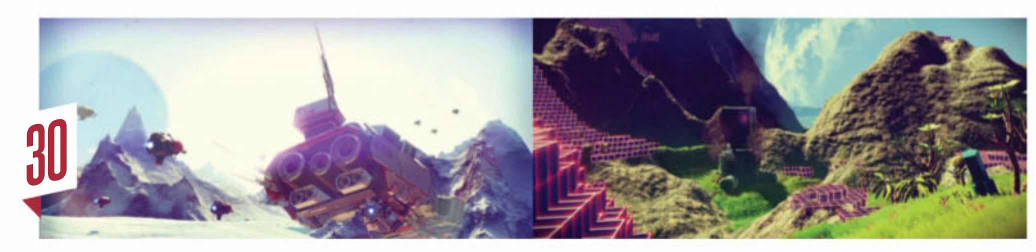
29

CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS III

Release date 6 November 2015
Developer Treyarch

■ In a future where drones are the new A-bombs, humanity stripped them out of the skies and started again, reverting back to the soldiers behind the guns: this game is basically *Captain America* meets *Call Of Duty*.

30



NO MAN'S SKY

CLOSE YOUR EYES AND COUNT TO ONE QUINTILLION

DETAILS
FORMAT PS4
ORIGIN UK
PUBLISHER SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT
DEVELOPER HELLO GAMES
RELEASE 2015
PLAYERS 1-TBA

■ A UNIVERSE SIMULATOR. A couple of years ago, we'd have been sceptical of such an idea even being able to exist, but in a world where we've got scientists setting up 72-nation simulations in *Civilization V*, people using 3D printing to replicate limbs, and Hideo Kojima supposedly employing a surgeon to pull off a head transplant to promote *Metal Gear Solid V*, anything is possible.

In light of that, *No Man's Sky* spans a ridiculous 18 quintillion planets – that's a number with 18 zeroes on the end. That would take one person roughly five billion years to explore… if you visited one planet every second. Putting that into perspective, the best brains on our own meagre planet reckon the sun will burn out in roughly 4.6 billion years… so if you looked at *No Man's Sky* in a certain light, you could argue it will outlive the universe.

The development team over at Hello Games initially programmed the game using a 32-bit metric to procedurally generate its expansive universe, but that wasn't enough – when they realised that would take you a paltry 5,000 years to explore, they upped the game, programming the game around a 64-bit code. *No Man's Sky* pushes the boundaries of how we think about development – its literal in-game scale is a potent metaphor for the work the developers are doing for the games industry as a whole.

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ION

DAYZ IN SPACE



DETAILS
FORMAT XBOX ONE, PC
ORIGIN NEW ZEALAND
PUBLISHER ROCKETWERKZ
DEVELOPER IN-HOUSE
RELEASE TBC 2016
PLAYERS 1-TBC

■ DEAN HALL (whose name you might recognise as the creator of *DayZ*) isn't interested in making another one. No, he's been there and done that. He's got his sights set on something deeper now, something more progressive, more artful. *DayZ*'s rampant success has bank-rolled Hall's creativity and the result of this alignment of the stars is *Ion*.

Pegged as an 'emergent narrative massively-multiplayer online game', *Ion* shakes off all that floating around in orbit stuff you get in space games and focuses on the more human aspects of intergalactic life. It's about humanity's first fumbling steps into colonising the universe – think of the *Fallout* Vaults in space: huge constructions you've created, will live in and will inevitably die in.

With a *Diablo*-esque camera focusing on your player, *Ion* will feature organ simulation and – we assume – real-time body aging and degradation, alongside fully simulated air pressure, heat systems and power grids. It seems to be a space-gothic experiment wrapped in a sci-fi skin – pseudo-philosophical and self-aware, more *The Swapper* than *Star Citizen*, more *Dead Space* than *Elite: Dangerous*. It's the thinking person's MMO of the future.



THE RARE RESURGENCE

NO MORE KINECT SPORTS GAMES HERE…

■ THE RARE REPLAY boxset has roughly £1000 worth of games in it (by the developers' calculations, at least). It has 30 games total, and that price point comes from someone in the studio totting up what it would cost you to buy all the titles individually *with* the original consoles you'd need to play them. As it stands, though, you're liable to be paying *less than a pound* per title.

The *Replay* set covers a breadth of generations and celebrates exactly what Rare has brought to the industry in its 20+ operational years. The games aren't just thrown onto a disc and held together with sloppy UI, either – there's a CRT filter you can activate to emulate watching the games on the old, classic TVs; the UI is made to resemble papercraft, and it changes tone depending on which game you have open. This is less of a standard games collection, and more of an interactive exhibition, a celebration of creation.

The collection also adds a slew of optional cheats you can activate if you want to make those hardcore retro games (like *Battletoads*) a little easier, and – of course – the game will feature save states practically on demand. Oh, and there's a massive 10,000 Gamerscore on offer through the collection, too.

But that's not all – at the Xbox presser at E3, Rare also debuted a brand new game: *Sea Of Thieves*. It's a first-person pirate adventure game that has a really strong multiplayer focus. It looks like you'll basically command a ship with your friends and take to the seas to plunder and seek adventure. If Rare still has its multiplayer hat on from the *GoldenEye 007* days, then expect that one to be a little more revolutionary.

This is Rare's return to form – now that Kinect has been thankfully put in the ground, Rare is free from its tyrannical grasp on the studio and it looks like this freedom is being capitalised on in the most creative, apt way we can think of. We just hope *Sea Of Thieves* is infused with as much of that ethereal 'Rare magic' as the *Replay* collection is.

32 CONTENTS OF RARE REPLAY

Every game you can expect on the mega-collection

Jetpac 1983	Atic Atac 1983	Lunar Jetman 1983
Sabre Wulf 1984	Underwurlde 1984	Knight Lore 1984
Gunfright 1985	Slalom 1986	R.C. Pro-Am 1987
Digger T. Rock 1990	Snake Rattle N Roll 1990	Cobra Triangle 1989
Solar Jetman 1990	Battletoads 1991	R.C. Pro-Am II 1992
Blast Corps 1997	Killer Instinct Gold 1996	Battletoads Arcade 1994
Banjo-Kazooie 1998	Jet Force Gemini 1999	Perfect Dark 2000
Grabbed by the Ghoulies 2003	Conker's Bad Fur Day 2001	Banjo-Tooie 2000
Perfect Dark Zero 2005	Kameo 2005	Viva Piñata 2006
Viva Piñata Trouble in Paradise 2008	Banjo-Kazooie Nuts & Bolts 2008	Jetpac Refuelled 2007

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EAT YOUR 'ART OUT

WHY THE LAST GUARDIAN IS MORE RELEVANT THAN EVER

DETAILS
FORMAT PS4
ORIGIN JAPAN
PUBLISHER SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT
DEVELOPER TEAM ICO / SCE JAPAN STUDIO
RELEASE TBC 2016
PLAYERS 1

■ THE LAST GUARDIAN was announced six years ago. For five of those years, there has been silence. It wasn't so much in 'development hell' as 'development purgatory'. But it – along with its titular Guardian beast, Trico – is alive, and animated with in-game, in-engine gameplay.

But, six years after it was announced, is *The Last Guardian* still relevant? It was built for the PS3, a spiritual successor to *Ico* and *Shadow Of The Colossus*. After Ueda and his dev team faded into the background somewhat, other games built on what the studio started: the PS3 saw *Journey*, a non-vocal pseudo-multiplayer adventure game that explored the idea of environmental storytelling more than *Ico* did.

We saw *Brothers: A Tale Of Two Sons*, which ventured deeper into the idea of emotional mechanics – of physical actions creating emotional consequences, something established by Ueda in *Shadow Of The Colossus*. So what, really, can *The Last Guardian* do that these console interlopers can't?

It can combine the elements, fuse the atmospheric, environmental narratives of the more languid games with the action and reactions of the more action-based ones. By moving away from the PS3, Ueda and his team have built *The Last Guardian* on a dedicated physics engine – something none of his previous games have done. This allows for puzzles that revolve directly around you (and by extension, Trico) – *you* move the stick, the world falls apart. *You* pull down that pillar, and risk giving Trico a nasty knock. It might not sound like much, but anyone that's played *Brothers* knows how emotionally manipulative a single analogue stick can be, and anyone that's played *Journey* knows how meaningful a change in scenery can be…

We've seen arguments that *The Last Guardian* is outdated, that it's awoken from a coma to stumble into a world it doesn't understand. We respectfully disagree – we believe that these last six years have been well spent by SCE Japan and Team Ico, learning from their combined history to establish another emotional epic.

THE GAMES THAT PAVED THE WAY

Thanks to the recent release of a broad array of indie games and experimental concepts, the appeal of *The Last Guardian* has grown beyond the Team Ico hardcore into a much larger crowd



BROTHERS: A TALE OF TWO SONS

The engagement achieved through two analogue sticks still makes us feel emotionally uncomfortable whenever we think about it. A beautiful, well-told story.



JOURNEY

One of the most communicative non-vocal games we've ever played (that's not a paradox if you think about it, we promise) – *Journey* is a masterclass in environmental storytelling.



PAPO & YO

A thinly veiled metaphor focusing on a child's turbulent relationship with an alcoholic parent, this was more focused on its message than its gameplay, but certainly showed promise.



RAIN

Rain – while essentially a platformer-lite – played some really nice tricks with water physics and rain-based puzzles, *and* it was made by Japan Studio. A test project, perhaps?



NEVER ALONE

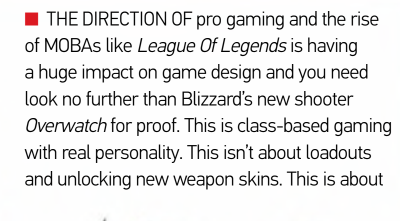
A game focused on a small girl and her lupine companion, the similarities between this and *The Last Guardian* are evident. The 2.5D approach in *Never Alone* worked against it in the end, though.



OVERWATCH AND A NEW AGE OF MULTIPLAYER SHOOTERS

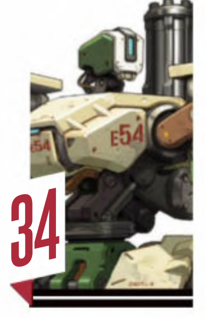
DETAILS
FORMAT PC, MAC
ORIGIN USA
PUBLISHER BLIZZARD
DEVELOPER IN-HOUSE
RELEASE TBC 2016
PLAYERS 1-12

BLIZZARD'S MONSTER LEADS THE CHARGE FOR FPS MOBAS



■ THE DIRECTION OF pro gaming and the rise of MOBAs like *League Of Legends* is having a huge impact on game design and you need look no further than Blizzard's new shooter *Overwatch* for proof. This is class-based gaming with real personality. This isn't about loadouts and unlocking new weapon skins. This is about picking a character that plays to a very particular playstyle and has a very particular role in a team. Games like *Overwatch* and *Battleborn* are bringing a fresh take on team-based and horde-mode FPS gaming, so here's a rundown of the cast revealed so far and what you can do with them.

34



BASTION (Neutral)

■ A largely defensive robotic character, Bastion can sacrifice movement to become a super-powerful stationary turret firing a mini-gun or cannon.



HANZO (Shimada Clan)

■ A ranged character with a bow, he can attack multiple enemies and place tracking arrows on them.



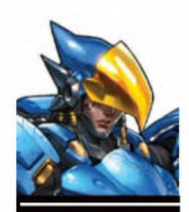
MCCREE (Overwatch)

■ A quick, brutal force, McCree is ideal against support class characters with his six-shooter. His DeadEye Ultimate Ability kills everything in sight.



MERCY (Overwatch)

■ A classic medic, Mercy can heal or buff allies so long as her beams remain in contact. She can also launch herself towards allies and resurrect them.



PHARAH (Helix Security)

■ A ranged attacker, Pharah is the perfect foil for defensive characters thanks to her attack that can bring down shields.



REAPER (Neutral)

■ A long-range rogue, Reaper can sneak around with Shadow Step and pick off enemies with his twin guns. Catching him in the act is a challenge.



REINHARDT (Overwatch)

■ A heavy melee tank, Reinhardt is the man you turn to for breaking through enemy lines or protecting weaker allies.



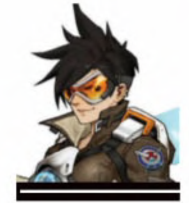
SYMMETRA (Vishkar Corporation)

■ Symmetra's Ultimate creates a teleport for allies allowing them to travel instantly from spawning.



TORBJORN (Overwatch)

■ While he's one of many who can create a turret, he's the only one that can heal them, making him a zone control saint.



TRACER (Overwatch)

■ Speed is the name of the game with Tracer, whipping around the back lane and resetting time to regain ammo and health. A neat trick.



WIDOWMAKER (Talon)

■ This ranged character is best defending a location from attackers. A grappling hook helps her remain out of reach.



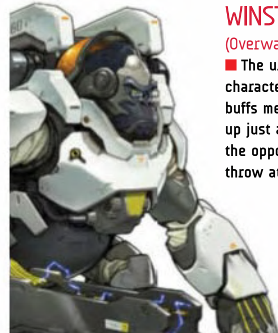
ZARYA (Russian Defense Forces)

■ A recently revealed tank, Zarya has a fierce particle cannon and the ability to place barriers on allies and herself.



ZENYATTA (The Shambali)

■ Another medic, Zenyatta takes a long-term view of healing with extended duration and mass heal abilities at his disposal.



WINSTON (Overwatch)

■ The ultimate tank character, shields and buffs mean he can soak up just about everything the opposition can throw at him.

35

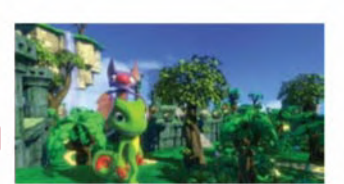


QUANTUM BREAK

Development Team: Remedy Entertainment
Release: TBC 2016

■ Remedy has seen a few changes at the top of the studio with its CEO leaving after 15 years, but all word points to this ambitious project still being on course. The time-hopping shooter is looking anarchic and gorgeous, but the pressure is on.

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YOOKA-LAYLEE

Development Team: Playtonic Games
Release: October 2016

■ Is *Yooka-Laylee* just *Banjo-Kazooie* in a different skin? Not from what we've seen so far. Sure the base is there, but Playtonic is making the best use of its new characters and new skill-sets on top of what the classic Rare platformer delivered.

37



THE WITNESS

Development Team: Thekla Inc.
Release: TBC 2015

■ Be prepared to set a little time aside if you're looking forward to playing Jonathan Blow's latest game as the latest estimate is that it could take 70 hours to 100 per cent the game. That's pretty meaty for an open-world explorer. Very exciting.

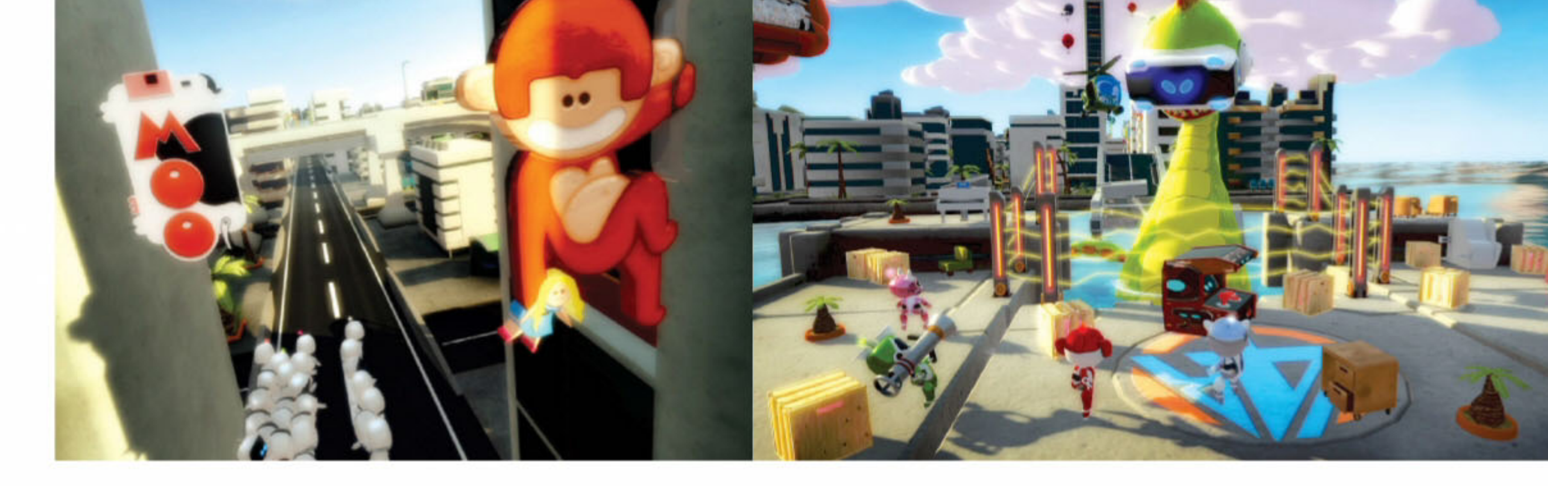
38



38. BELOW

Development Team: Capybara Games
Release: TBC 2015

■ Capybara is on a winning streak, but *Below* is probably its most ambitious game to date. It's a massive roguelike where if you die you return as your own descendant. It's dark, moody, has great music and looks incredible.



PROJECT MORPHEUS DAZZLES

THE VR TECH IMMERSES PLAYERS WITH IMPRESSIVE DEMOS AND UNBELIEVABLE CAPABILITIES

THE GAME INDUSTRY'S VR movement is in full swing with companies announcing VR tech in the hopes of cashing in. Sony's Project Morpheus was one of the first to appear, and another impressive hands-on session places it right at the top of the pile. Four demos showed the breadth of what Morpheus can do, and each one left us dazzled.

First is *Playroom VR*, a multiplayer game where four players with controllers take on one wearing Morpheus. As the Morpheus player we played a Godzilla-like monster and destroyed buildings by moving our body side to side and headbutting objects. Morpheus tracked our movements well and the in-game reactions were spot-on, as buildings crumbled as soon as we thrust our head at them.

Next was *Battle Zone*, which emulated classic tank battle games of yesteryear. Here, Morpheus acted as our eyes and ears, letting us look around the battlefield and listen for enemies while moving and firing with a DualShock 4. Enemies offered little resistance as Morpheus allowed us to find and dispatch them with incredible sound design and visual acuity, knowing where we were looking and making sure our view was always perfect.

Third was *London Heist*, inserting us into a high-speed car chase using Morpheus and two PlayStation Move controllers. We used a sub-machine gun against our attackers, aiming and firing with absolute precision. Reloading was as simple as reaching in a bag for a clip and touching it to the bottom of the gun, all done with the Move controllers. The in-game action coupled with precise responses to our movements made for one awesome experience.

Finally we tried out *Kitchen*, a Capcom tech demo perfect for horror buffs. *Kitchen* is an excellent lesson in environment immersion, creating a spooky scene in a decrepit kitchen. We could hear the ghoulish figure haunting this demo approaching from all sides; we watched in horror as it beheaded our in-game companion; and we jumped out of our chair when it reached across our field of vision from behind and stuck a knife in our face as the demo ended.

Project Morpheus is shaping up to be a masterpiece, and these four demos are perfect examples of it. Immersive worlds, reactive controls, and interesting concepts are leading the charge for Morpheus as it nears its 2016 release window, and we're looking forward to whatever new demos Sony has planned next.





Above There's a lot of power hidden in this small headset, and Sony has done everything it can to let the world know what its VR can do. The Project Morpheus demos showcase the best of what VR has to offer.

THE FEEL

FITTING MORPHEUS onto our head was quick and easy, although we did find ourselves having to make adjustments a couple of times mid-demo. Sony needs to figure out how to keep Morpheus steady on a player's face.

CONTROL

EACH OF the three control schemes presented in these demos worked amazingly well; combining the versatility of the Morpheus tech. DualShock 4, Move controllers, and motion controls made for a fun and responsive experience.

MOVE RETURNS

THE PLAYSTATION MOVE controller could be poised for a triumphant return with Morpheus, as the demo using it was the most fun we had in our Morpheus experience. We hope we see it more.



ACCLIMATISING

IT'S RATHER jarring to instantly transport from a convention hall to a whimsical cartoonish world or a high-speed car chase just by wearing a headset. Players will need some time to get used to it.

MOTION SICKNESS

THOSE WHO experience motion sickness might want to think twice or do some research before trying out Morpheus, as we saw a few folks who weren't faring so well when the goggles came off.

DETAILS
FORMAT PLAYSTATION 4
DEVELOPMENT TEAM SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT
RELEASE 2016

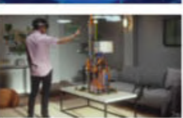


IS HOLOLENS FOR REAL?



MICROSOFT'S NEW TECH IMPRESSES, BUT LEAVES QUESTIONS



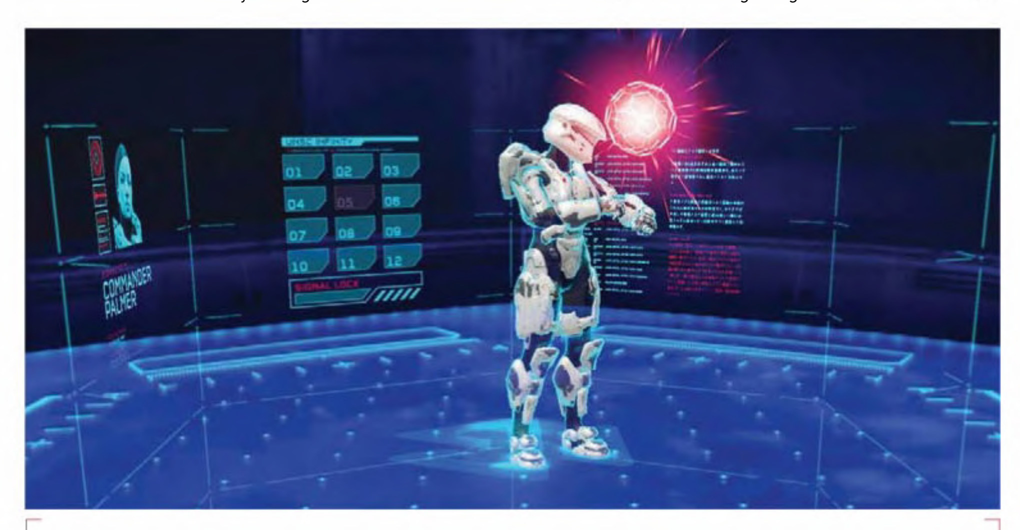


■ **Above** HoloLens works with hand gesture controls, in theory allowing you to pinch and drag the environment – in the case of *Minecraft*, dragging the world one row of blocks at a time – to see other areas. It also detects the central point that you're looking at, acting as a cursor of sorts into the world.

■ WHICHEVER WAY YOU slice it, Microsoft certainly had the most technologically compelling conference at this year's E3. HoloLens is Microsoft's augmented reality glasses, a system it hopes will bring everything from office life and gaming together. Functional in the real world wherever you are; at home, waiting at the dentist's, wherever. It's using *Minecraft* as its videogame tech demo showcase, and after witnessing it in action you can certainly see why; where ordinarily players can witness the blocky world from first-person, with HoloLens you'll see it from a god's-eye view.

The HoloLens uses a flat surface – a desk, a table, whatever you have – and on it will be your *Minecraft* world, with you peering down from above. You'll be able to view the world from any angle simply by moving around the table, and even peering inside structures and underground by moving in closer. It'll make that search for diamonds that much easier, that's for sure. Since it's seen as a permanently set point of view, the camera can be altered through voice to zoom in, follow a particular player or scroll to the side. Each of the game's console commands have been implemented via voice recognition, too, so you should have just as much control.

There are still a lot of questions, of course. Does HoloLens really work as well as it seems to? Is it not awkward controlling your *Minecraft* character from on top like that? Will it work properly in your home? There are far too many questions just yet, but as a statement of intent it's clear that Microsoft has some very, *very* exciting tech on its hand. AR has long been one of those concepts that has failed to ever get to the level of quality where it can truly get off the ground, but if what Microsoft promises comes to pass then – much like the state of VR – it could lead to some vital technological advances for gaming as a whole.



■ **Above** Currently the biggest gripe is that the holograms won't fill the entire display of the HoloLens glasses, meaning the illusion is spoiled quite heavily by the way the image bleeds out the closer you get.



STEAMVR

Development Team: Valve
Release: Q4 2015

■ There are so many VR headsets around these days it's hard to really know which is worth keeping an eye on; what is clear is that of the lot SteamVR has the hardware clout and the backing of the PC community, so it stands a good chance of becoming dominant, even alongside competitor Oculus. *DayZ* creator Dean Hall has confirmed he's working on a new VR game, so at least Valve has eased concerns by proving it is working on some exclusive software itself.



OCULUS RIFT

Development Team: Oculus
Release: Q1 2016

■ Oculus has announced a consumer release date of Q1 2016, an in-built software system not unlike the home screen of a console, as well as a raft of new, VR exclusive titles from Insomniac, Harmonix and many other indie developers. The biggest news, though, is Touch, the accompanying pair of controllers that hook around your hands, providing the face buttons of a traditional controller with the gestures of motion control.



Above It wouldn't be a *Gears* game if there was some intense shooter action from behind cover, but this looks like a more intact world than we're used to.

Above What are these strange creatures attacking COG forces in *Gears 4*? We don't yet know, but something bad is likely to be behind them.



GEARS RE-EMERGES

CRY HAVOC, LET LOOSE THE COGS OF WAR

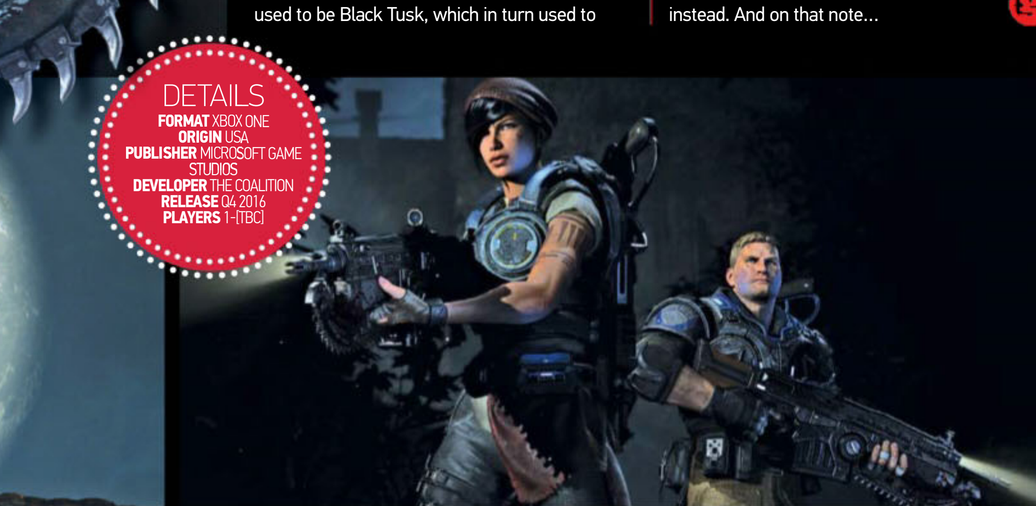
IT'S DARK AND stormy, and our two protagonists are rushing towards a towering structure that's more Castle Wolfenstein than we've seen from *Gears Of War*. They're pursued by *something*, whether that's a Locust or not remains to be seen… all we know is that the two COG soldiers are running, running for their lives, away from this storm and the darkness it brings. JD and Kait – the soldiers fleeing the inclement weather pass surprisingly calm banter back and forth – the kind you'd expect from Marcus Fenix and Delta squad.

The most notable thing about *Gears 4* that we've seen is the shooting. You'd expect that to be the case from a *Gears* game, though, right? Then permit us to go into a bit more detail. The cover-based shooting *very* quickly became synonymous when the series first appeared on the Xbox 360 – it didn't invent the genre, but it definitely made it a core part of the series' DNA from the very beginning. *Gears Of War 4* carries on this staple mechanic with style – you can still glue yourself to a wall (shotgun equipped), blow an enemy's head off as it approaches and then fling yourself into the frontline, chainsaw buzzing, without missing a beat.

It's that instant shift that *Gears* has always been good for – the mathematics it makes you dance around as you try and work out if you should leave the safety net of your cover and maybe get a bit more up close and personal before you're swamped. The Coalition (which used to be Black Tusk, which in turn used to be Microsoft Game Studios Vancouver) won't redesign this gunplay too much – if we've learnt anything from 343 following up Bungie's work on the *Halo* series, it's that fans of Xbox franchises *really* don't like change.

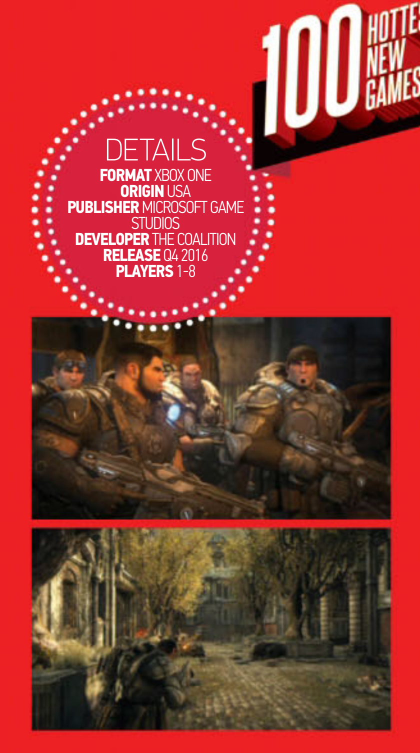
That said, a cursory look at the gameplay footage on offer so far gives us *one* hint at some potential gameplay evolutions – we mentioned earlier the atmosphere feels very *Wolfenstein*: those towering gothic structures, that storm brimming with pathetic fallacy, those crumbling stone facades… this indicates to us that the whole game is liable to go in a more close-combat kind of thing. Think *Resident Evil*, think *Dead Space*; you've got all that strong gunplay alive and well, but it's all taking place in much tighter corridors, much smaller spaces. Enemies can get at you easier, making the game a little more twitch-y, and a tightly-knitted selection of campaign maps means those famous *Gears* setpieces could feel much more about you than about the world crumbling to bits.

The team at The Coalition are remaining tight-lipped about where (and when) the sequel sits – is it in the world of Sera? Is it set pre- or post-*Gears of War 3*? Will Delta make an appearance? Is there a Carmine that dies? We have a lot of unanswered questions, but since the game isn't due for a release for the next year and a half (!) we're not expecting too much news to come out of Microsoft just yet. Maybe we should get to playing *Gears Ultimate*, instead. And on that note…



DETAILS
FORMAT XBOX ONE
ORIGIN USA
PUBLISHER MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS
DEVELOPER THE COALITION
RELEASE Q4 2016
PLAYERS 1-[TBC]

Above We had been expecting a *Gears* prequel or remake, but this is looking more like a direct follow-up to the events of *Gears Of War 3* with an entirely new cast.



DETAILS
FORMAT XBOX ONE
ORIGIN USA
PUBLISHER MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS
DEVELOPER THE COALITION
RELEASE Q4 2016
PLAYERS 1-8

6 UPGRADES YOU'LL FIND IN GEARS OF WAR: ULTIMATE EDITION

1 **IT'S THE 'DEFINITIVE EDITION'** – that is to say, this version of the game will have all the content that was cut from the Xbox 360 game due to time constraints; new story beats in Chapter 5, for example, as well as all DLC maps.

2 **IT'S 1080P AND 60 FRAMES PER SECOND**, despite running on its original (but now heavily modified) Unreal 3 engine.

3 **ALL THE CUTSCENES HAVE BEEN RECUT**. That's a new orchestral soundtrack, new graphics… the only thing that remains the same is the voice-acting.

4 **MULTIPLAYER COMES WITH THREE NEW MODES.** Team Deathmatch (which the original somehow lacked), King of the Hill, and a formal mode for the fan-made 'Gnasher' two-on-two variant.

5 **IT HAS SOME OF GEARS 3'S MECHANICS,** such as the Tac-Com and spotting/tagging enemies for your partners to clock.

6 **IT'S FASTER AND BETTER FOR CO-OP PLAY.** Movement and travel feels more like it did in *Gears Of War 3*, and you can pop out of cover to revive teammates, swap weapons while roadie-running, and dodge in any direction.

THE FUTURE OF JRPGS

FINAL FANTASY VII REMAKE

COULD THE PS1'S SYSTEM-SELLER STRIKE AGAIN ON PS4?



DETAILS
FORMAT PS4
ORIGIN JAPAN
PUBLISHER SQUARE ENIX
DEVELOPER IN-HOUSE
RELEASE 2016
PLAYERS 1

■ DON'T EXPECT THIS to be the same game you played back in 1997. Tetsuya Nomura – heading the development of the remake – said the project was already under development before the PS4 port of the vanilla version was announced, that the crazier elements of the game (cross-dressing, having a squat-off, etc) will remain in the game despite its darker tone, and the team is developing the title hoping to boost the sales of the PS4.

Kazushige Nojima is on scripting duties, which we're happy about; he's proved a better scenario director than a lot of other Square Enix contenders recently – and original director Yoshinori Kitase has moved onto 'producer' status. Kitase has previously stated that any kind of *VII* remake would 'be the last thing he ever does' and that 'it would be his final task'… make of that what you will, but it could herald the swansong of one of Square's most venerable staffers.

Nomura has also publicly stated that he thinks the battle system of *VII* has become 'dated' (naturally, it's almost 20 years old!) and that the development team is experimenting with other, newer systems to add into the battle mix. We reckon they could scrap the Active Time Battle idea all together and go for something more like you'd see in *XII* or *XV*.

Nomura also confirmed that it won't be the exact same story that we've been replaying since the Nineties – Nojima has been brought in to modernise some of the broader *VII* themes in light of the other 'compilation' entries that have come since: *Dirge of Cerberus*, *Advent Children* and *Crisis Core* to name but a few. This is the *exact* kind of remake we've wanted for a while, but not the one we think all the fans will be happy with. We look forward to seeing exactly how this surprise announcement matures in the coming months.

NIER

IT'S NOT A SEQUEL, BUT IT WILL BE JUST AS WEIRD AS THE ORIGINAL



DETAILS
FORMAT PS4, XBOX ONE
ORIGIN JAPAN
PUBLISHER SQUARE ENIX
DEVELOPER IN-HOUSE / PLATINUM GAMES
RELEASE 2016
PLAYERS 1

■ ANOTHER TOTALLY out-of-the-blue announcement from Square Enix, the next *Nier* game will be hitting consoles at some point in 2016. The first game was a masterpiece of the genre in our eyes, but that's not a sentiment echoed by many people *at all* in the West, partly on account of many gamers not ever having played the game – in fact, sales were dismal in Europe and not much better in the US. Still, the way the game deconstructed the one-point perspective of most JRPGs and played around with how it told the story in the New Game+ playthroughs was inspired. It was a truly risky JRPG – something rare and beautiful in a genre often relying far too heavily on the same design/gameplay ideas. The game lacks a formal name, but boasts the *Bravely Default* character artist, the battle director from Platinum (*Bayonetta*, *Metal Gear: Revengeance*) and the same director of the previous game; it's like a who's who lineup in Japanese game design right now.

KINGDOM HEARTS III

DO YOU WANT TO KILL A SNOWMAN?

■ 'MAKING SENSE' HAS never been a priority of the *Kingdom Hearts* games – run a search for its incredibly convoluted timeline to see what we mean – so the fact that Sora can now summon theme park rides to help him take down enemies just seems to be another facet of the series' inherent whimsy, and somehow we're right on board. From the original train we knew we could summon to a new-fangled spinning cup ride, pirate ship and roller-coaster train, it seems we've got a *lot* more to look forward to. *Kingdom Hearts III* is taking the mix of strategy- and action-based JRPG battles to some offbeat conclusions, but we're fine with that – if it means more involved, unpredictable battles, everyone's a winner. The newest reveal confirms the presence of the *Tangled* universe in the game – a nice departure from Wonderland – and hints at things to come. Now that Disney owns *Star Wars*, we're hoping for something Death Star-related, and of course, then there's the inevitable appearance of *Frozen* to look forward to.



DETAILS
FORMAT PS4, XBOX ONE
ORIGIN JAPAN
PUBLISHER SQUARE ENIX
DEVELOPER IN-HOUSE
RELEASE 2016
PLAYERS 1

FIRE EMBLEM FATES

THE WORLD'S LEADING SRPG GOES ALL POKÉMON

■ PERHAPS IT'S A cynical cash-in, or perhaps it's a way of experimenting with variations in storyline and gameplay – call it what you will, but *Fire Emblem Fates*' two retail versions are certainly different to what the series has done before. It looks like the two games will be themed to good and evil, darkness and light, chaos and order. Apparently going for the darker game makes things a bit harder (more difficult win conditions, bigger battles) but that remains to be seen.

From about 30 minutes of gameplay we've seen, not too much seems to be changing – the layout of the arenas remains the same, the way you form units of two characters remains the same, and even the in-battle relationship mechanics seem unaltered. Weapon degradation is gone, though, and the series' famed permadeath is now non-mandatory (which we're not too happy with, but we'll just play it on Hard mode, right?).

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DETAILS
FORMAT 3DS
ORIGIN JAPAN
PUBLISHER NINTENDO
DEVELOPER LEVEL-5
RELEASE 2016
PLAYERS 1

SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI X FIRE EMBLEM

OR, IN JAPAN, GENEI IBUN ROKU #FE

44



DETAILS
FORMAT WII U
ORIGIN JAPAN
PUBLISHER NINTENDO
DEVELOPER ATLUS
RELEASE 2016
PLAYERS 1

■ STILL LACKING A formal name, the unexpected crossover boasts the personal interactions and self-reflective narrative of a stock *Shin Megami Tensei* game, mixed with the strategy and high-concept fantasy of *Fire Emblem*. That said, the duelling development teams (half formed from each side of the crossover) eventually settled on one core idea: that the *Fire Emblem* bits of the game needed to be buried beneath a real world.

Enter the 'mirages' – reimagined characters from the *Fire Emblem* series that are drawn to people of great creative power. These ethereal spirits can be both good and evil – luckily for us, the good ones are helping the protagonists of the game achieve their life goals: to be the best singers and dancers in the world. This whole J-Pop theme runs through everything, right to the roots of combat, too. Rhythm action-based fights? We really hope so.

XENOBLADE CHRONICLES X

THE EARTH IS DEAD

■ WE'VE FINALLY BEEN graced with our first look at the English version of Monolith Soft's newest project, alongside the promise we'll get to play it Q4 this year. We've played a bit of the Japanese version, and it's one of the most impressive-looking Wii U games available; we wandered up the side of a cliff, taking out light sabre-wielding enemies en route, to find this cavernous valley at the crest: the draw distance was insane, and the fact we could go *anywhere* blew our minds. We think *Xenoblade Chronicles X* is a great step forward for player choice in the genre – it's more open-ended than we could have possibly predicted – but at the same time, it's held back by some really cluttered UI design, and the menus are barely navigable. Maybe this will be iterated upon in the Western release – we know Japanese reviews of the game have criticised this presentation, too.

DETAILS
FORMAT WII U
ORIGIN JAPAN
PUBLISHER NINTENDO
DEVELOPER MONOLITH SOFT
RELEASE WINTER 2015 (NA)
PLAYERS 1

45



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PROJECT SETSUNA

Release date TBC 2016
Developer Square Enix

■ Developed as a new IP by Square Enix in a studio set up especially for the project (Tokyo Software Factory), *Setsuna* seems to take its cues from pre-*Final Fantasy VI* games.

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WORLD OF FINAL FANTASY

Release date TBC 2016
Developer Square Enix

■ Arriving on Vita and PS4 later this year, *World Of Final Fantasy* is like a compilation of every *Final Fantasy* game that's come before it, brought to life with chibi characters and series icons.

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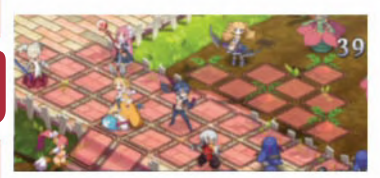


STAR OCEAN V: INTEGRITY AND FAITHLESSNESS

Release date TBC 2016
Developer tri-Ace

■ *Star Ocean V* comes *right at the end* of the *Star Ocean* continuity, which is odd, since the whole series timeline nearly died in the last instalment. Time-travel confirmed? It seems likely.

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DISGAEA 5

Release date 9 October 2015
Developer Nippon Ichi Software

■ The PS4's first SRPG promises more characters on-screen at any one time, and some refinements to a core battle system that hasn't changed in over a decade. We're happy with that, dood.

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KINGDOM HEARTS X[CHI]

Release date TBC 2015
Developer Square Enix

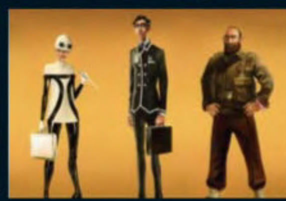
■ The iOS/Android game is set way back at the start of the *Kingdom Hearts* timeline, and will feature scenes and levels directly tied into *Kingdom Hearts III*. We expect it to be very similar to *Final Fantasy: Record Keeper*.

IS THIS THE NEXT BIOSHOCK?

DETAILS
FORMAT PC
ORIGIN CANADA
PUBLISHER COMPULSION GAMES
DEVELOPER IN-HOUSE
RELEASE TBC 2016
PLAYERS 1

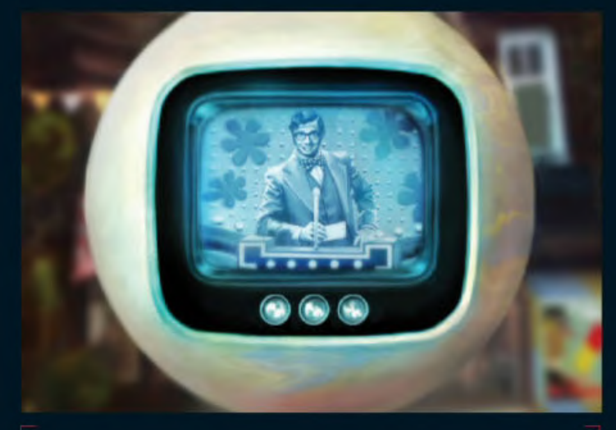
WE DIG DEEP INTO WE HAPPY FEW WITH GUILLAUME PROVOST



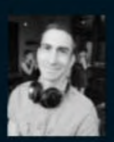
51

Above Themes of conformity, drugs and denial run through the game as society appears to have given up its personal identity and liberty in favour of security.



Above The dystopian setting of *We Happy Few* is drawing positive comparisons to Irrational's FPS, but it has its own unique design and a very different balance of gameplay.





Comparisons to *BioShock* came in pretty fast for *We Happy Few*. Is it a comparison you welcome?
We hadn't really foreseen it, but it's a very flattering comparison, so of course it's welcome! Gamers and press always compare games to other games, and *BioShock* is a revered franchise that we are also big fans of at the studio. I think that if fans see something in our game from a franchise they loved, we can only be thankful for the association.

A lot of the themes in *BioShock* are present in *We Happy Few*: a dystopian society, alternative history and mid-century time-periods all contribute to creating a similar atmosphere, but we try and educate everyone to the fact that the game plays very differently. *We Happy Few* is a roguelike, and as such it is not a linear, story-driven campaign like *BioShock*. Story is imparted through discovery and experimentation. It also takes place while the society is still functioning, rather than in its aftermath.

Aesthetically, what were the key influences that helped you to settle on the look for the game? How important is art design to Compulsion as a team?
Our art director, Whitney Clayton, puts a lot of work and effort in researching the time periods and locations involved in the games that we make. There's a visual signature to the environments that we create that I think is a real important component of our identity; which incorporates stylised forms and detailed material textures. We've had big inspirations from Tim Burton, Henry Selick, and stop-motion film in general for the stylization of our games.

For *We Happy Few*, I originally introduced the context of a dystopian, *Brave New World* inspired society, and Whitney brought the idea of contextualising it in 1960s England. She loved the architecture and the cultural changes associated with the time. We had a number of film influences while doing early research: *The Prisoner*, *Monty Python*, *Doctor Who*, *Brazil*, and *A Clockwork Orange* just to name a few. But we also looked at major trends in 1960s fashion, music and psychology. The period is a fascinating one, as it marks a desire to move on (from the war), a relentless optimism for the future, designs that favour form over function, and a fascination for technology and space; all of it shaping up as the perfect test-bed for our little dystopian world of denial.

Procedurally-generated roguelikes don't typically have as defined a world or as much story to them as you're providing. How have you gone about balancing these?
We're definitely of two minds with it. The studio has a strong record for building story into our games with our last game, *Contrast*, and it's a trait we wanted to keep moving forward with in *We Happy Few*. However – we also wanted to create something that was replayable and systemic in its nature.

We did a few things to marry the two competing priorities in *We Happy Few*. First, we invested heavily into the world's lore and history. Uncle Jack's shows, the dialogue of the citizens on the street, as well as various scenarios and encounters that help reveal the world's history help develop the background of the world and provide a direct explanation for players on how the world became what it is.

Each of our playable characters also has different motivations and goals within the world, and we are distributing story agents and events that are specific in developing their personal story arcs. This helps us create a more cohesive play experience without tying us into a linear narrative experience.



THE 3D PUZZLER REBORN WITH

RATCHET & CLANK

THE MOST STUNNING TITLE IN THE SERIES TO DATE

52

INSOMNIAC IS NO stranger to ludicrous shooters with stupid enemies and weird protagonists – it's been making *Ratchet & Clank* games for *years*. But we've got a theory – we believe that the studio's tepidly received *Sunset Overdrive* was an experiment; it was getting all the gunplay guff out of the way to make room for *Ratchet*'s triumphant return.

We're suckers for a good 3D platformer here at **gamesTM** – there just aren't enough of them around anymore. As a genre, the games need an incredibly tight level design in order to even function – this grows a culture of creativity and left-field thinking in development teams. *Crash*, *Spyro*, *Jak*, *Super Mario Galaxy* and so many other games have been born of this need for an off-beat developmental mindset.

Enter *Ratchet & Clank* on PS4, a game that totes a tentative suffix: The Game Based On A Movie Based On A Game. We're off to a good start. With some delightfully Dreamworks-inspired animations, levels and concepts based on the *very first Ratchet* game and some stellar voice work (if you ignore that Ratchet is played by *Final Fantasy X*'s Tidus…) we're expecting big things from the only game that's going to give *Knack* a run for it's money on PS4… but that's really not going to be too hard, is it?

DETAILS
FORMAT PS4
ORIGIN USA
PUBLISHER SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT
DEVELOPER INSOMNIAC GAMES
RELEASE 2015
PLAYERS 1

UBISOFT INVENTS A NEW GENRE WITH

FOR HONOR

53



DETAILS
FORMAT PS4, XBOX ONE, PC
ORIGIN CANADA
PUBLISHER UBISOFT
DEVELOPER UBISOFT MONTREAL
RELEASE 2016
PLAYERS 1-8

MEDIEVAL HARDCORE GAMING STARTS HERE

A 4V4 BRAWLER from Ubisoft? No-one could have predicted this would be a reality by 2016, but here we are, torn between three factions. We've got The Chosen (modelled on Samurai warriors), we've got The Legion (based on knights errant) and we've got The Warborn (read: Vikings). You've got yourself and three player-controlled allies rushing into battle with you, supported by a gaggle of NPC soldiers. It all looks fairly MOBA-like to us, but with a bit of a twist.

Combat with AI is easy – it looks a bit like *The Witcher*'s system, block and dodge and you'll come out on top. It's when you take on enemy heroes that things get a bit more heated; it's a battle of parries and well-timed heavy blows. It's about footwork, it's about looking for openings. Actually, it's a pretty decent emulation of real sword fighting – very few games can boast that. It looks like Ubisoft is trying to trivialise the MOBA somewhat, stripping back some of the mathematical underpinnings of the genre in order to make it more console-friendly.

In the process, Ubisoft Montreal seems to have created a new genre – it's reminiscent of *War Of The Vikings* and *Chivalry* (both PC exclusives), but minus the over-the-top violence. We can imagine this game getting quite competitive, the battles look set to be tense, no matter what skill level each player is. It's a game that falls somewhere between *The Witcher*'s combat, the *Assassin's Creed* animations and the lane-based play of any MOBA. Let's wait and see how this game deals with microtransactions, though…



OMG HAX

Hacking was an important part of *Human Revolution* and it returns in *Mankind Divided*, albeit with a few tweaks. Jensen now no longer needs to be next to something in order to hack it; he is now able to hack electronics remotely, letting him stand away at a safe distance and take control of cameras and robots while confused enemies try to figure out what's going on. Another benefit of this is the ability to open doors from a distance, letting you prepare an exit in a crowded area in advance whereas before you wouldn't have had the time to run up to it and hack it while exposed. It's not all good news, however; the hacking mini-game that annoyed some players is still there.

Inset According to Eidos Montreal, Jensen is playing a double-agent role in this story, as "he believes the task force he is working for is being manipulated by the Illuminati". Expect numerous plot twists before the end credits roll.

"EIDOS MONTREAL IS KEEN ON MAKING ALL-OUT ACTION A MORE VIABLE OPTION, WITH A NEW NANO-BLADE WEAPON LEADING THIS CHARGE"

Left Jensen is armed with taser darts which can be used to temporarily take enemies down. While there's a greater focus on action in *Mankind Divided* and stealth is less encouraged, non-lethal takedowns are still rewarded with more XP than lethal ones.

Above Victor is in the Augmented Rights Coalition and is considered responsible for multiple terrorist attacks.



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DEUS EX: MANKIND DIVIDED

DETAILS
FORMAT PS4, XBOX ONE, PC
ORIGIN CANADA
PUBLISHER SQUARE ENIX
DEVELOPER EIDOS MONTREAL
RELEASE Q2 2016
PLAYERS 1

WE'VE HAD REVOLUTION, NOW IT'S TIME FOR EVOLUTION

IT'S HARD TO believe now, but there was a time when the announcement of a new *Deus Ex* game without the involvement of series creator Warren Spector led to strong backlash from dedicated fans. Since then Eidos Montreal has shown with *Human Revolution* that it is more than capable of producing a game that lives up to the series' reputation and – crucially, in the *Director's Cut* – paying heed to the fans when identifying and fixing its flaws. As a result, the news that another new entry in the series is on the way has now been met with overwhelming excitement, Spector's spectre be damned.

The fifth game in the series (if you count mobile title *Deus Ex: The Fall*, which Square Enix is adamant you should), *Mankind Divided* takes place two years after *Human Revolution.* Once again, players are placed in the mechanically augmented body of former security officer Adam Jensen, this time travelling to Prague to help stop an upsurge of terrorist activity. The events of the last game have led to greater divisions between humanity and transhumans – those with augmentation capabilities – so it's up to Jensen to try to build bridges by foiling the potentially devastating plots of transhuman terror groups.

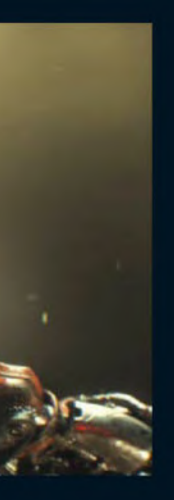
The freedom to explore and the ability to tackle missions in the style you see fit are key aspects of any *Deus Ex* game, and the demo we got to see indicates that *Mankind Divided* is making no attempts to deviate too wildly from this successful formula. The now ubiquitous 'stealth or action' options are ever-present, offering players the choice to take their time and infiltrate enemy territory completely undetected, or metaphorically kick the front door in and empty a gun shop's worth of ammunition into anyone in your way.

Naturally, this is nothing new in this day and age, but it's the series' augmentation abilities that ensure each scenario is less black-and-white; with Jensen only able to equip a certain number of augmentations, the special abilities players are armed with will vary from game to game, requiring a slightly different tactical approach each time.

A number of new augmentations have been added to *Mankind Divided*, introducing new gameplay mechanics to players and further increasing the number of possible skill combinations. The new Icarus Dash augmentation, for example, enables Jensen to zoom from one point to another in the blink of an eye, letting him cross large gaps and do massive damage to any enemies who happen to be in his path. It also helps players take advantage of the game's new emphasis on verticality: areas with higher vantage points are now the order of the day and offer more potential routes to consider.

It's the combat where Eidos Montreal is hoping to make the biggest stride forward, however. Players felt *Human Revolution* put greater emphasis on stealth than action, with things falling apart a little when gunplay was required; indeed, the fact that playing stealthily tended to award more XP suggested this was the way you were expected to play. This time, while non-lethal takedowns still grant more XP than kills, the team is at least keen on making sure all-out action is more of a viable option with a new nano-blade weapon leading this charge. This sword extends from Jensen's arm but can also be detached and thrown across the room at an enemy. If you miss them and lodge it in a nearby wall, you can then detonate it and cause a massive explosion.

It's clear, though, that Eidos Montreal isn't willing to rock the boat too much and is instead content to build on the lessons it learned developing *Human Revolution* and its *Director's Cut.* The studio has already proven its ability to take over this iconic series: now it's won over the fans and earned its right to *Deus Ex*'s ownership, this is its chance to show how it can evolve it further.







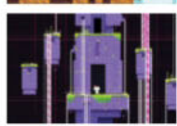
Above Alex is an ex-pilot helping Jensen with his investigation. She acts as a go-between for Jensen and the mysterious Janus Collective.

COMPOSER TO THE INDIE ELITE

RICH VREELAND, AKA DISASTERPEACE, ON COMPOSING FOR THE INDIE MASTERS

Photo: Kaya Savas





■ **Above** *Fez* was the game that put Vreeland on the map for many gamers, adding the perfect aural accompaniment to one of the most mind-bending and engaging indie games of recent years.





■ **Above** *Mini Metro* is currently in early access in Steam, but is already looking like a fantastic spin on a train management sim through puzzle mechanics and the gorgeous art style.



What elements of a project are likely to draw your attention and make working on it more inviting to you?

I like to work on projects that will push me in a new direction creatively, and I like to work on things that I feel have inherent value. A Venn diagram where these two ideas meet is often where I am looking.

What lessons do you feel you've learned working with games like *Fez* and *Hyper Light Drifter*?

Hyper Light is still in development, but I've learned that devoting yourself fully to a project, and being in the same physical location as the other members of your team goes a long way in solidifying the work. It also goes a long way in making the process more enjoyable. It makes me feel more accountable for my work and for my decisions, and it's great to get to know the people I work with.

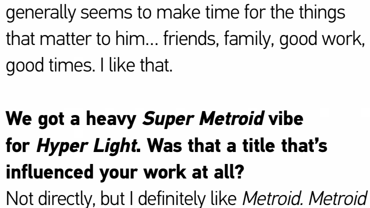
Given your experience working closely on *Hyper Light*, would you be interested in becoming a more permanent fixture of a development team?

I think it would have to be with people I really love, who are committed to working on lots of different types of projects, and I'd have to be very centrally involved in the development of ideas. Being a freelancer is really great, and I think I would only give it up for an opportunity to do really challenging, fulfilling work with good people.

Are there any other artists you've found particularly inspirational, whether through their music or the way they've developed their careers?

I am inspired by so many artists… it's hard to count. Two people are coming to mind for me, who are pretty unrelated in most ways. My friend Jake Kaufman, who writes music under the name virt, has been writing music for games for a very long time. He has the attitude (rightfully so) that he can tackle just about any style and genre, and he always seems to put in the time to study and learn about the music and musicians who have come before him. He has taken his music to some incredibly varied places, all while remaining very true to his musical identity, and I have all kinds of respect for that. The other person who came to mind is Bill Murray, who seems to have a very healthy relationship to his work. He did a really great interview with Charlie Rose that resonated with me. He becomes friends with the people he works with and works with his friends, and generally seems to make time for the things that matter to him… friends, family, good work, good times. I like that.

“I ENJOY GETTING MY HANDS DIRTY BY CODING MUSIC BEHAVIOUR”



We got a heavy *Super Metroid* vibe for *Hyper Light*. Was that a title that's influenced your work at all?

Not directly, but I definitely like *Metroid*. *Metroid Metal* is a project my friend Grant has been doing for a long time, and that music definitely had an impact on me at a pivotal time. I think *Hyper Light* and *Metroid* share a sense of vast, underground depths. I've really been trying to channel that kind of vibe.

Are there any particular challenges to working on video game music compared to working on a film score in your experience so far?

Working on games is a different beast. It can be as complicated or straightforward as you want it to be, on a number of axes that are generally not appropriate for linear media. I really enjoy getting my hands dirty by scripting and coding music behaviour, when I can. Right now I'm coding/designing a procedural music system for a game called *Mini Metro*.

Have you found indie games to be a particularly rich playground for testing yourself as an artist?

Yes! There is a great breadth of opportunity in indie games and I feel that I've been fortunate to work on some pretty disparate projects. I think that pushing myself to do new things and work in new styles has an inherent "playground" quality to it.

What are your personal ambitions as a composer?

My ambitions are based in a value set, more so than in specific goals. I want to continue to grow as a person and an artist and continue to explore new avenues.



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WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT **MASS EFFECT: ANDROMEDA** SO FAR

IT'S STILL IN THE MIDDLE OF SOME CALIBRATIONS

DETAILS
FORMAT PS4, XBOX ONE, PC
ORIGIN USA
PUBLISHER EA
DEVELOPER BIOWARE
RELEASE 2016
PLAYERS 1-TBC

You've Got A Whole Star System To Explore
This isn't your parent's solar system. Neither is it Shepard's: BioWare has been clear that it wants to make this new instalment in the series feel like a standalone story that can be told in parallel to the original *Mass Effect*. Expect to see Quarians, Geth, Asari, Turians and Krogan, though – it'd be an insult to previous games to shed these fantastic races (but we *are* hoping for an Elcor team-mate).

You're Not Shepard
Your Shepard might be dead, missing in action or just taking a nice long vacation somewhere. They might not even have been born yet. Nothing is certain, but what we *do* know is that you'll be playing an N7 agent that carries on the Shepard philosophy (being a cosmic badass) with all the freedom humanity's most dangerous soldier deserves.

Some People Might Call You A 'Space Cowboy'
Bear with us. The formal announcement trailer featured a dusty Western-esque landscape with Johnny Cash playing over the top. Your new character is observing the planet through a Star Map on what could well be a new (or old) Normandy. Where the original trilogy opted for a typical 'space opera' narrative formula, we're kind of expecting this one to go more 'hero's quest', ie a space western.

The Mako Is Back
Loved by some, hated by many, the original Mako from the first *Mass Effect* game returns in Andromeda. It's had some revisions though – gone are those clunky controls, gone are those awkward prompts. It'll be more like the *Arkham Knight*'s Batmobile (we hope). Prepare to journey to many planets to mine them of their delicious, lovely resources.

Hold Onto Your Old Mass Effect Saves
So says Mike Gamble, associate producer of the game. How will these come into play? Speculation points to the fact that it might set up a world state or two – depending on your ending to *Mass Effect 3*, there might be more machines roaming the universe, or there might be a lot less… the Krogans might be extinct, or they might not. The possibilities are (just about) endless.

It'll Feel Like Dragon Age: Inquisition
Back in 2013, it was confirmed that BioWare was sharing system tech between *Dragon Age: Inquisition* and *Mass Effect 4*. What this means precisely is up to personal interpretation, but we have a few theories: we think the map will be split into zones, each with various areas of exploration (more like *Mass Effect* than either of its sequels). We also think the top-down tactical fights might well make an appearance, coming from the fantasy side of BioWare.

It's Written By *Halo 4*'s Lead Scripter
We have mixed opinions on this – while some of the characterisation and pacing of the most recent *Halo* adventure was great, the themes of the story and a bit of sloppy execution failed to impress. Still, an RPG is a very different beast to an FPS, so maybe writer Chris Schlert will be more at home within this genre.

"BIOWARE WANTS TO MAKE THIS NEW INSTALMENT FEEL LIKE A STANDALONE STORY"

56

FABLE: LEGENDS
Release date TBC 2015
Developer Lionhead Studios



It's coming out, we promise. All that time in closed beta is helping Lionhead Studios focus on the game in the middle of all the free-to-play trappings. If the game's system works, it could set a precedent for console free-to-play execution. Everything we've seen so far has impressed us.

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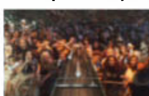
NEED FOR SPEED
Release date 5 November
Developer Ghost Games



A complete reboot of the series, the new *Need For Speed* is apparently going to bring in some of the BioWare writers to pad out the story and make people care about the cars they're driving (or something). We're intrigued, we'll give the game that much.

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SOMA
Release date 22 September
Developer Frictional Games



The developer behind *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* is clearly unhappy with how much it's messed with our frail minds already, so this sci-fi horror project plans to get further under the skin than any other survival horror game. The very thought sends shivers down our spine.

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GUITAR HERO LIVE
Release date 20 October
Developer FreeStyleGames



Activision recently announced it will be launching *Guitar Hero TV* alongside the main game – working across iOS, Android and all the consoles (and PC), *GHTV* lets you play the game to music videos of your favourite artists. It's an interesting idea, but we're sceptical of the execution.

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ROCK BAND 4
Release date 6 October
Developer Harmonix

We're getting near-weekly updates on the new game's setlist, and we like what we're seeing: a great mix of genre, instrumentality, vocal performances and age. We're hoping for more prog this time around, but *Rock Band 4* is still looking like a genuine crowd-pleaser.



THE RETURN OF THE MODDERS

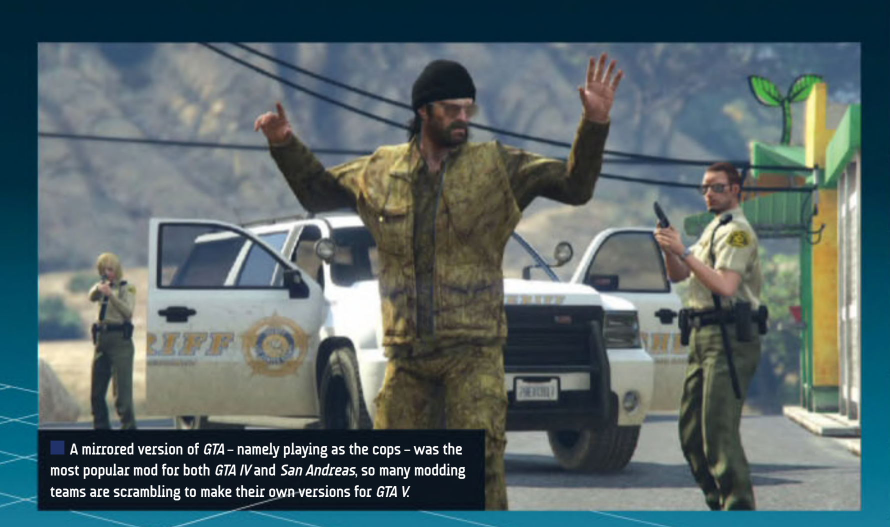
HOW THE RISE OF THE MODDING COMMUNITY IS ABOUT TO CHANGE THE INDUSTRY FOREVER

Modding is an odd concept. A subset of gamers devoting all their free time to adding content, improving issues or even dramatically overhauling their favourite games, often putting hundreds upon thousands of hours into their creations without expecting a single penny for the hard work. It defies the capitalist heart of the industry that such passion, dedication and – in many cases – success should lack any compensation. Until recently, that is. Modding has always been a significant part of gaming, often unknowingly altering the direction that the industry might travel in and the way games are made and played, yet now – more than ever before – modding has become *popular*. But why? What has changed to empower such determined communities?

"I think it's easier nowadays, especially with Steam Workshop where you have a centralised way of sharing the mods," claims Mariina Hallikainen, CEO of *Cities: Skylines* developer Colossal Order. An obvious answer, perhaps, but very true with the advent of Valve's Steam Workshop – an integrated system of sharing your mods. "I think it is making modding easier since it becomes easier for all the players to find the mods," adds Hallikainen, "and this is definitely something that is making modding more popular in my opinion. I think it's really great to see that we now have a way for the majority of the players to easily see what can be possible and then they can get inspired and maybe get into modding themselves as well." Ordinarily modding was left to the hardcore, to those gamers willing to put in the extra time finding and downloading different tools, altering INI files and debugging everything when it all went wrong. It stands to reason, then, that a system that pushes mods to the forefront of every gamer and makes it easy to add or remove the creations of others, should make modding more important.

"I got into modding when I actually wanted to change a mod I was using," says Emmi Junkkari, better known as *Skyrim* modder Elianora. "I think it was a house mod too, it needed a few more mannequins and some clutter. I had played the game for a thousand hours – with mods, too – and the *Skyrim* modding scene was really starting to get into speed." Bethesda's *Skyrim* has become a haven for the modding community in recent years as it enables fans to open up and customise the already rich world and improve upon it tenfold, providing new content, changing the way it plays and even how it looks. Over the years since its release we've seen everything from complete graphical overhauls to swapping out the fearsome dragons for surprisingly creepy flying Thomas the Tank Engines.

More recent examples come in the likes of *Cities: Skylines* or *Grand Theft Auto V*; the latter was always going to find popularity even after the many months of delays that the PC release had suffered, but it's a series with a rich heritage of modding all the same. With *Cities: Skylines*, however, it was practically a selling point, a focused feature for the game that was even used as a bullet point in the game's trailers. The developer's first game, *Cities In Motion*, released in



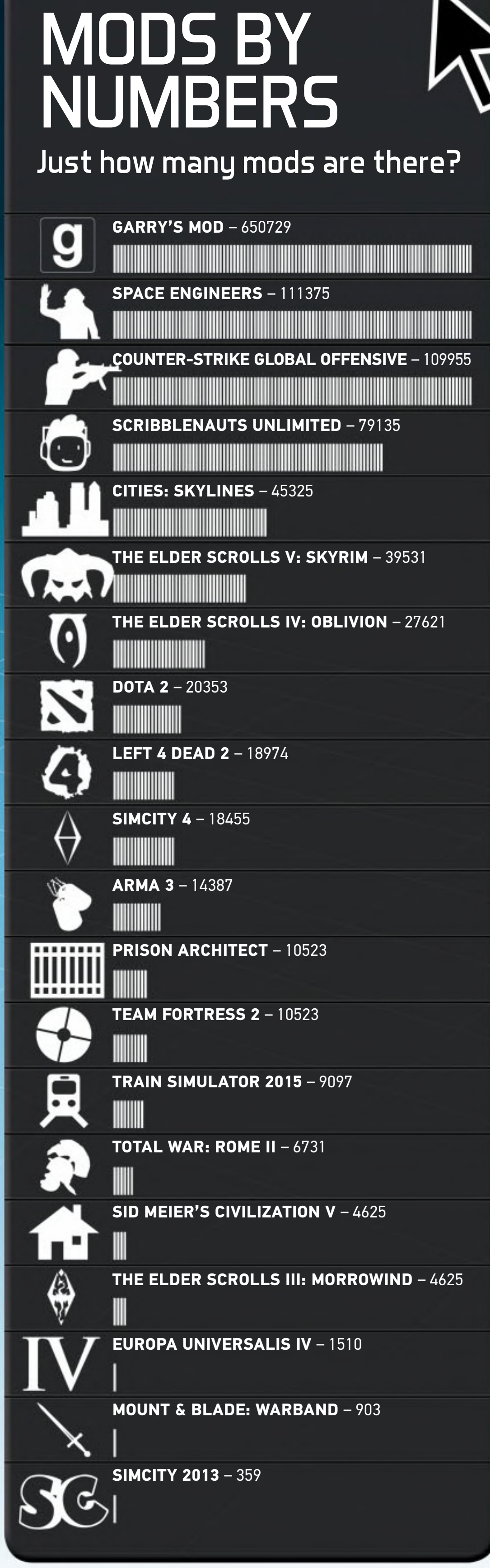
A mirrored version of *GTA* – namely playing as the cops – was the most popular mod for both *GTA IV* and *San Andreas*, so many modding teams are scrambling to make their own versions for *GTA V*.

2011 to a surprising amount of success, a fact – says Hallikainen – that is owed entirely to the modding community's ability to open the game up. "Well, they broke it apart," laughs Hallikainen. "It was so easy for them to modify the game because we didn't have the resources – or we didn't even realise – to kind of protect the game against people wanting to mod it and get to the engine." The developer quickly realised the game's success was borne out of the passionate community keen to tweak and improve it to their liking, and its follow up sequel would aim to do the same. "In *Cities In Motion 2* we tried to make it so that it was easy to mod, but we failed miserably, I have

"THERE IS CRITICISM THAT DEVELOPERS RELY ON MODDERS TO FIX THEIR GAME. THAT'S NOT THE POINT, I THINK IT'S ENRICHING"

to say," claims Hallikainen. Building the game in the Unity Engine meant it was more closed than Colossal Order had intended, and modders just couldn't work with it; cut to *Cities: Skylines*, a game also made in Unity but with a whole new in-game asset editor that allows players to import their own 3D models. The decision was made to make *Cities: Skylines* as moddable as possible, and by advertising that as a key feature it quickly took off – selling well over one million copies during its launch window and already seeing well over 40,000 different mods.

But was the game a success because of its moddability? Or was it simply the demand from scorned *SimCity* fans hoping to be satiated after EA's latest was released? "I think that's definitely a part of it," says Hallikainen of the game's mod-driven popularity. "I think it speaks to how open we are to the community. With *Cities: Skylines* we achieved exactly what we wanted to achieve with it, to make an open game for people to not only create their own city with the tools they have but also utilise the modding community. And that doesn't mean we have to allow »



THE MOD GENERATION

The mods that put a gameplay spin on their respective titles



POLICE MOD

Base game: Grand Theft Auto V

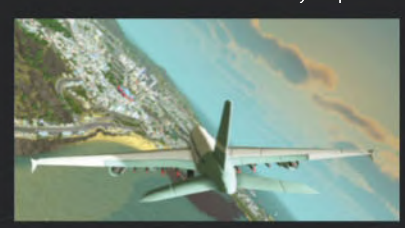
■ There are a couple of mods that put you into the boots of the Los Santos Police Department; whichever succeeds will be the one to update most often. With this overhaul of *GTA V* you'll find yourself able to take on different calls – from shootouts to high-speed chases – as well as go on patrol yourself.



FLIGHT CIMULATOR

Base game: Cities: Skylines

■ Not content with adding new buildings or overhauling gameplay, modder Ulysius has added a flight simulator into *Cities: Skylines* – giving you the freedom to fly around your own city. Don't be put off by the mod's spelling; the game's community uses 'The Cims' as an ironic twist on *SimCity*'s equivalent.



A GAME OF THRONES

Base game: Crusader Kings 2

■ There's never been a greater pairing than the political intrigue of *Game Of Thrones* with the feudal diplomacy simulation of *Crusader Kings*. This total conversion mod has you picking a faction, vying for control and doing so with all the political manipulation you'd expect of Westeros.



INDUSTRIALCRAFT 2

Base game: Minecraft

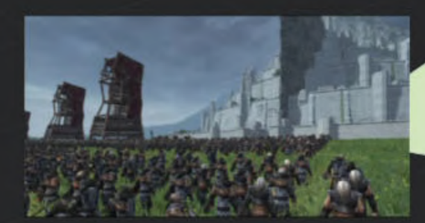
■ For a game as popular as *Minecraft* you won't be surprised to learn that there are mods of all shapes and sizes available. IndustrialCraft adds in tons of new items and blocks to craft, allowing you to – as the name might suggest – set up your own crafting industry with a multitude of automation options.

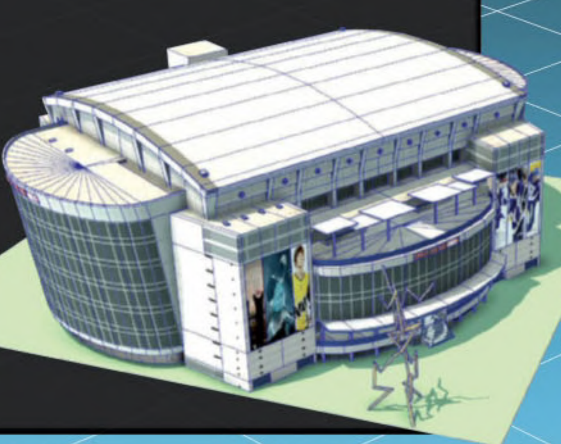


THIRD AGE

Base game: Medieval II: Total War

■ This might be one of the older total conversion mods, but it still gets updated to this day and is *still* one of the best mods out there. You replace the core game of *Medieval II* with Tolkien's Middle-earth, complete with all the locations that Peter Jackson just couldn't fit into the films.





» modding because we have a broken game; there is some criticism that developers rely on modders to fix their game. That's not the point. I think it's enriching. It's something that brings more to the game."

As more and more developers realise the supplementing capabilities of mods – thanks in large part to the immediacy and ease of use that comes with Steam Workshop – the time that players are willing to devote to a single game increases. Fabio Emerick, another *Skyrim* modder who goes by the username Anamorfus, admits that it's the value-added nature of mods that keeps games popular long after their traditional life cycle has passed. "The players – myself included – want bigger games," he says, "games with countless hours, giant maps, big interesting quests, better graphics on the PC platform. *Skyrim* has an end, there is a total amount of quests in the game that is possible to finish, but then a modder comes and puts in an entire new world to explore with quests and top quality mod production; it puts a smile on the players' faces because they are able to explore more content in the game they love."

Developers are always looking for ways to keep players involved with their games for as long as possible. Gradually evolving games – with feedback from the fanbase – is the new go-to fad when it comes to game development these days, and the more input these players have the more willing they are to keep playing and trying out new, updated



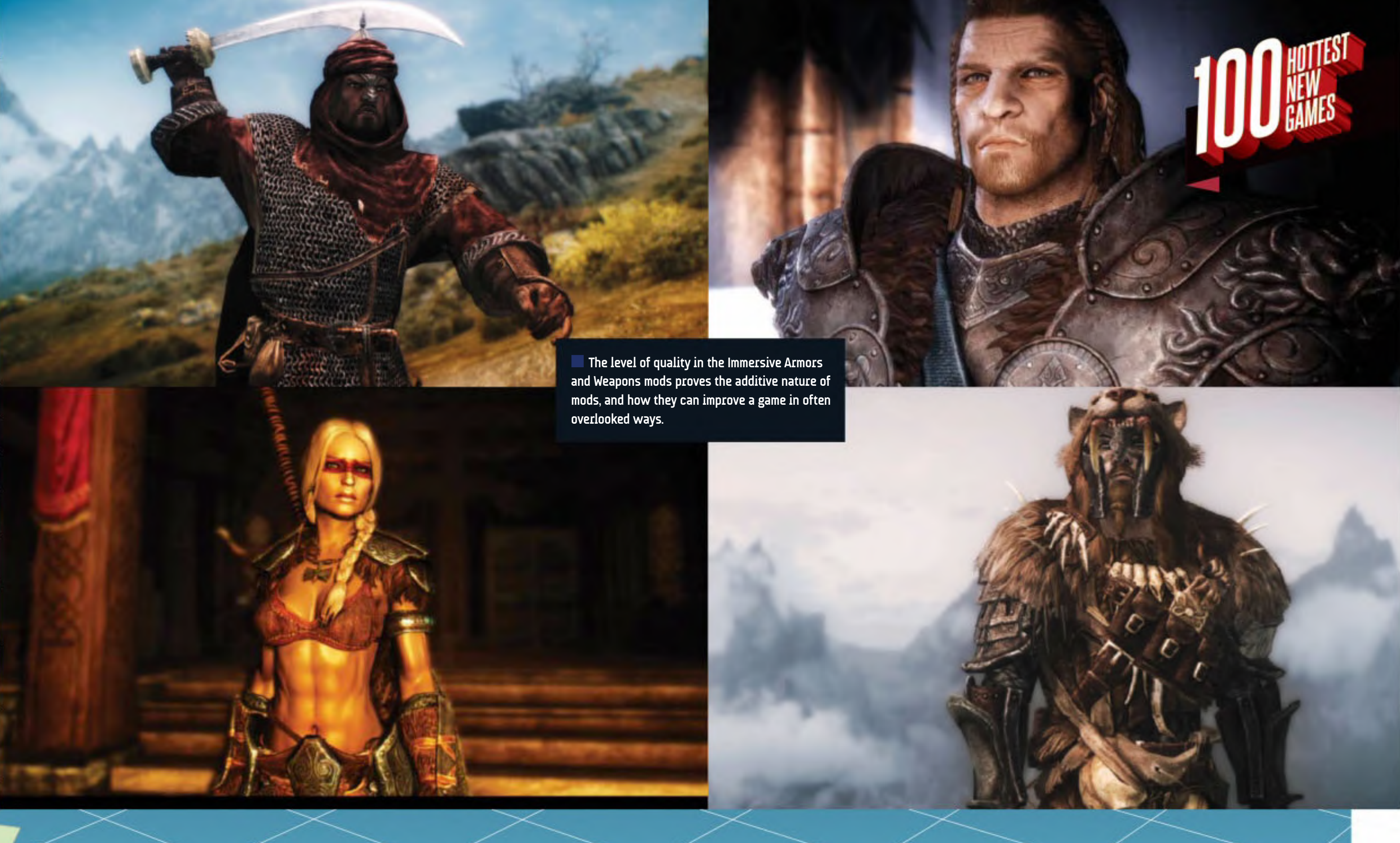
■ *Team Fortress 2* was the flagship Workshop title for Valve, and has grown to include a wide range of creations from dedicated modders, from skins and hats to weapons and new features.



■ There's a huge modding community surrounding *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*, many of them involving new maps or skins for your favourite weapons.

features. Modding is a clear extension of that; modders will put hours into a creation, and once it's done they'll spread the word, drawing in new players courtesy of the content they've made for free. Yet with the rising popularity of modding a new dynamic has risen. Bethesda was at the forefront of a controversy recently, one that divided the usually collaborative modding community in half. In an unexpected move alongside Valve, Bethesda enabled an option for paid mods – a system that utilised Steam Workshop to allow modders to sell their creations, with a cut going to both Bethesda and Valve.

That split, however, is rather neatly segregated between content creators and content users. The former, having put in the hours of work, saw a benefit to being rewarded financially for their efforts. The latter, who have for years accepted mods as free extras to their games, insisted the status quo should remain. "I don't want to make money by modding," says Elianora, "I even feel kind of awkward receiving donations but I can totally see how someone would want to make this a career. Doing something you love, all day, every day and getting paid for it? I don't see how that cannot be. If I make paintings in my free time, should I not be allowed to sell them for pocket money?" But she even admits there are a lot of grey areas that need to be solved before such a system could work. "As I know how much work mods can be and how much money some software and modding assets can cost, I'm all for paid mods, but if and only



The level of quality in the Immersive Armors and Weapons mods proves the additive nature of mods, and how they can improve a game in often overlooked ways.

if it is implemented properly. A curated Workshop, proper moderation of content, a possibility for other content creators to check if their work is used against permissions without buying the mod, and some kind of proper buyer protection… then I would be okay with it."

Taking the concept of a career modder to the next level is Bryan Shannon, a former Maxis employee who – having been made redundant after the *SimCity* developer was closed – has made a name (and an income) from creating mods for *Cities: Skylines*. With the launch of the game Shannon set up a Patreon page, hoping to earn a little extra on the side while he continued looking for work. His proven experience at Maxis meant the Patreon ballooned however, and now he's currently earning over $600 for every single creation for *Cities: Skylines* he makes.

"As soon as I learned that you could create mods for *Cities: Skylines* I was almost like, 'Okay – can I monetise this?'" says Shannon. "Though that wasn't really the thought; it was more 'How can I continue to keep doing this, can I sustain myself doing this and can I even create a job doing this?' That was my ultimate goal, doing what I love to do. I think that was the key inspiration moment. Once I got set up on Patreon, though, my milestone goals were so small because I honestly did not anticipate hitting even the first one, at all." Now he's able to design and release 3D models of buildings for players to use in *Cities: Skylines*, and is currently earning enough to postpone the job search and concentrate on this as a living.

"When I was working at Maxis, the money just came from some imaginary place," he adds, "I get a paycheque at the end of the month and accept this life, whereas with Patreon every single dollar has to come from one individual person. It's super rewarding, and that's kind of the Patreon mentality."

Even with his success, however, Shannon knows his situation – at the moment – is fairly unique. Bethesda ultimately removed its option for paid mods, admitting it was ill-conceived. Valve responded too, claiming it is something that it would like to approach again but that there are too many questions that need answering. And so for now modding will remain the realm of those willing to do so for free, but a change *is* coming. "When Valve had mentioned that there were going to be paid mods, I wondered… 'Did I create a monster?'" Shannon tells us. "That was not what I wanted. I actually really enjoy the donate system, and for what it's worth I wish that when Valve comes out and releases their version of it I hope that'll be what it ends up being, a donation style thing where it's all integrated into your Steam wallet or something like that. We'll see how that goes."

"WHEN VALVE HAD MENTIONED THAT THERE WAS GOING TO BE PAID MODS, I WONDERED… 'DID I CREATE A MONSTER?'"

But there are far bigger problems that need to be resolved before the questions surrounding consumer responsibility and content creator protection are even asked. All the modders we spoke to had concerns over Steam Workshop. As a tool for the *user* it is heavily praised, and a great thing for enabling gamer accessibility to mods, but it is not a simple system to use. "We didn't consider having over 40,000 mods ever," claims Hallikainen of *Cities: Skylines*' huge collection of mods. "I think that what needs to be looked into is how we handle this amount of mods, basically just tagging the mods and trying to make it easier for people to use. We have added more tags but Steam Workshop is something that I think can be improved a little bit further." As much as Steam Workshop surfaces great content, it is still a struggle organising the sheer volume of many games' mods.

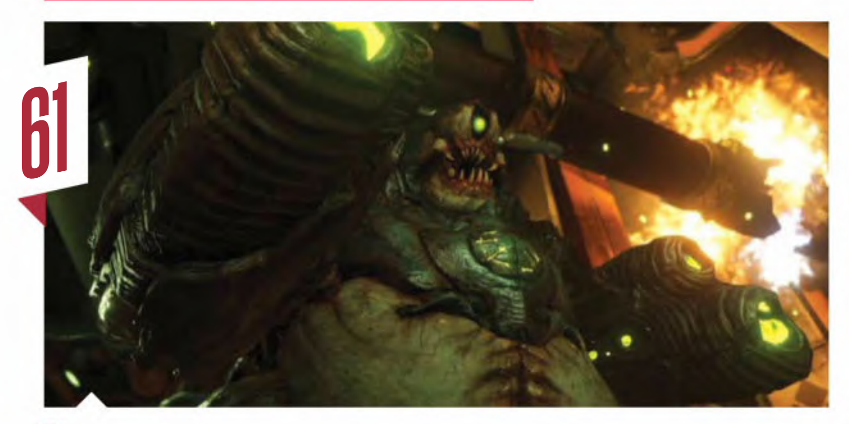
There are further problems on the creation side of things, too, as Shannon explains. "Let's say I make a firehouse and I forgot to put a texture on the door, if I want to change that, in order for me to do it it is a very hard runaround. It's totally fine when you're doing your first submission, but you've got to get it right the first time or you've got a lot of editing to do." Elianora adds to the criticisms, too: "Oh man, I could rant about Steam Workshop all day. I think it helped bring mod awareness to a bigger audience, and made the modding world much more approachable, but as a modding platform, it is… garbage." She adds that numerous changes need to be implemented, especially if paid mods are to ever take off. Elements such as version control, compatibility information and even the issue of Steam's forced updates all need to be resolved.

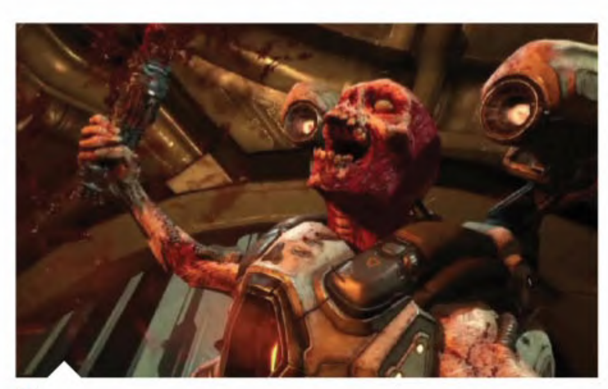
"If an author removes their work from the Workshop, it gives a tiny warning and then deletes the mod from people's games, causing save game issues and lost inventory," she explains. "Imagine all your precious treasures and loot stuffed in a player home and then losing that mod from your load order and save game. A bad update can ruin games as well and there's no way to stop the updates." The ball is, as ever, in Valve's court. While its stranglehold on the PC market remains, it's up to the Steam developer to first ensure its Workshop – a system that integral to PC games and modding – is sufficient to handle this influx of modders and mod fans. As it stands, the success of the modding community is being held back by a multitude of barriers. Something has to change; we only hope Valve is up to the task.

A CELEBRATION OF **DOOM**'S VIOLENCE

HAVE A SOAK IN THE BLOODBATH

61





IT'S BUILT TO OFFEND YOUR SENSES

1 "Badass demons, big fucking guns and moving really, really fast." That was how *Doom* was unveiled to us, proudly, by Bethesda and id. And that's what the game was originally built on way back in 1993 – it was an exercise in bloodlust and violence, unapologetically taking videogames down a route that would define its fledgling years as an artistic format.

...AND YOUR SENSIBILITIES

2 *Doom* 2016 is proud of that – hell, it wants that. It wants to stoke conversations about what is and isn't acceptable in gaming, and it's doing just that. We imagine writer Graham Joyce and IP holder Jon Carmack are grinning like maniacs right about now.





YOU CAN SHOOT EVERYTHING'S FACE IN

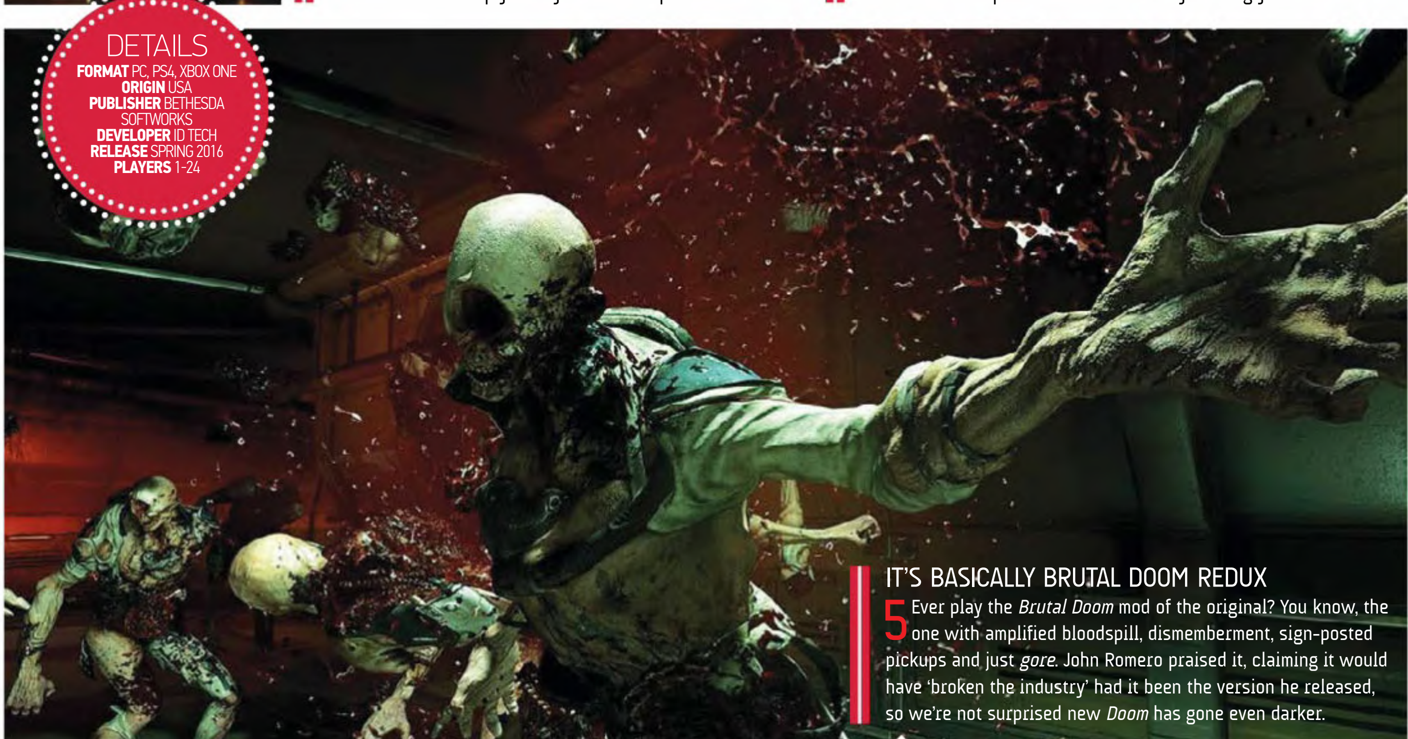
3 It's classic *Doom*. The old weapons dismember enemies effortlessly, eviscerating off bits of skull, entire limbs, ribcages, internal organs... anything you aim at. Returning tools of the trade – super shotgun, BFG-9000 et al – will help you in your violent quest.

...AND EVERYTHING WANTS TO KILL YOU TOO

4 Killing humans isn't really the done thing. But mutilating mutant freaks? Go on, then. *Doom* revels in its bloodiness, and enemies from the original games – Revenants, Cyberdemons, Cacodemons – are just big bags of flesh waiting for you to slice and dice them up. Bethesda isn't exactly holding you back here.

DETAILS

FORMAT PC, PS4, XBOX ONE
ORIGIN USA
PUBLISHER BETHESDA SOFTWORKS
DEVELOPER ID TECH
RELEASE SPRING 2016
PLAYERS 1-24



IT'S BASICALLY BRUTAL DOOM REDUX

5 Ever play the *Brutal Doom* mod of the original? You know, the one with amplified bloodspill, dismemberment, sign-posted pickups and just *gore*. John Romero praised it, claiming it would have 'broken the industry' had it been the version he released, so we're not surprised new *Doom* has gone even darker.



62

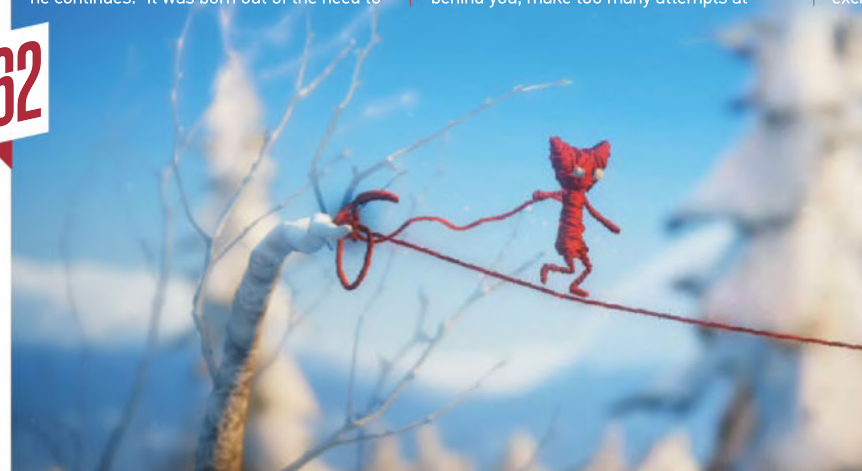
UNRAVEL

THREAD BARES ITS SOUL

"I THINK GAMES ARE really powerful things," says Martin Sahlin – creative director of Coldwood Interactive, on-stage at EA's E3 press briefing. "They have the ability to grab you and move you in a way that few other things can. That gives us, as game-makers, some responsibility. We should try to do more than just entertain.

"And Unravel was created in that spirit," he continues. "It was born out of the need to make something more personal. Something with a heart. The yarn represents love and the bonds that we make. And it unravels because that's what happens when we're separated from what we love." *Unravel* gives you the chance to play as the physical realisation of these bonds – you play as Yarny, a little red creature woven together. As you move through levels, you leave a trail of red string behind you; make too many attempts at fighting your way through a level, and there'll be nothing left of you… physically, emotionally or spiritually.

Unravel seems like a game made in the same spirit as *Ori & The Blind Forest* or *Little Big Planet* – a game about creativity, about relationships, human connection, framed in one of the most traditional gaming genres – a side-scrolling platformer. We're incredibly excited about *Unravel*.



DETAILS
FORMAT PS4, XBOX ONE, PC
ORIGIN SWEDEN
PUBLISHER EA
DEVELOPER COLDWOOD INTERACTIVE
RELEASE TBC 2016
PLAYERS 1

THE CULT OF ULTRA-HARD GAMERS CONTINUES TO GROW

63

DARK SOULS III

PREPARE TO DIE (AGAIN)

ESTUS FLASKS, BONFIRES, jump attacks, greatswords, dual-wielding weapons… they're all back. This is *Dark Souls* as you'll remember it, but for a few small differences. As it tends to be in life, though, these small differences add up to make pretty big dent in the overall product. You're still going to die a lot (that was always a given though, right?) and you're still going to be travelling around a dark, oppressive world killing things that have no right to be alive in the first place. You, player, are the dark hero, and you're tasked with taking down the Lords Of Cinder, and those Lords are *massive*.

That's the main thing *Dark Souls III* has got over its predecessors – it's got a much more intense sense of scale. You'll be going up against enemies far bigger than anything in *Dark Souls* or *Dark Souls II*, and movement has been developed to reflect that: a more intuitive movement system is in place now (which means the whole thing handles a bit more like *Bloodborne* than *Dark Souls II*).

There's also going to be a more unpredictable level of chaos in *Dark Souls III* (in case it wasn't hard enough already) – some enemies are capable of morphing into black masses of evil goop, changing form, attack pattern and resistance instantly, throwing a curve-ball at you, even if you're engaged with other enemies at the same time. Prepare to die, folks, because we can't see anyone getting through this as quickly as they did *Scholars Of The First Sin*…

DETAILS
FORMAT PS4, XBOX ONE
ORIGIN JAPAN
PUBLISHER BANDAI NAMCO
DEVELOPER FROM SOFTWARE
RELEASE TBC 2016
PLAYERS 1-TBC





INDIE GAME PLAYSTATION 4

64

FIREWATCH
ROAMING IN WYOMING

DETAILS
FORMAT PS4
ORIGIN USA
DEVELOPER CAMPO SANTO
RELEASE TBD 2015
PLAYERS 1

■ FIREWATCH LOOKS BEAUTIFUL. Promising to be one of those highly emotive experiences, Campo Santo's tale thrusts you into the lonely world of fire lookouts circa 1989, a job based solely on waiting in towers, watching for signs of smoke in the wilderness. You play as Henry, stationed in the Shoshone National Forest, who has taken the painfully lonesome gig for three months in an attempt to escape a personal life in tatters. It's a mystery game, with an emphasis on player responses rather than branching paths or multiple endings, and once you settle on a response, those answers you opted to eschew disappear into the ether forever. *Firewatch* is an intriguing title that has piqued our interest. The San Francisco-based studio tells us there is no right or wrong way to play the game, which, interestingly, doesn't feature any sort of fail states. "We want the interactivity to come through your interactions with the world and your decisions that you make, as opposed to through the challenge of an event," developer Chris Remo told Polygon. "You can make bad decisions that you decide are bad decisions – because that's what you realise in retrospect – but you can't play it wrong." Colour us excited, then.

65



EITR

Developer Eneme Entertainment
Release TBC 2016
Players 1

■ Hitting PS4 sometime next year under the Devolver banner, *Eitr* is a nifty little dungeon crawler that takes its cues from *Diablo*, *Dark Souls* and *Path Of Exile*, and has been crafted top to toe by just two (yes, really) UK-based developers with a penchant for *Zelda*, *Street Fighter* and *Smash Bros*. Based on Norse mythology, you play as a Shield Maiden battling through a world contaminated by Eitr, a black poisonous substance that corrupts whoever or whatever comes into contact with it.

66



CROSSING SOULS

Developer Fourattic
Release TBC 2016
Players 1

■ Fourattic's action/adventure romp looks set to impress when it hits PS4 next year thanks to a nifty control system that lets you switch between five friends on the fly, each one equipped with a unique special weapon, including a whip and even a NES Zapper. With more nods to Eighties cinema than you can shake a neon pink stick at, *Crossing Souls* thrusts the Goonies-style gang into an adventure across time and space in order to save their small town from destruction.

67



GANG BEASTS

Developer Boneloaf Games
Release Q2 2015
Players 1-4

■ *Gang Beasts* is a brilliantly bonkers four-player co-op brawler that pits squidgy, squashy little anthropomorphic blobs against each other as they hurl each of their rivals into flaming pits, onto busy motorways or into the path of speeding locomotives on a railway track. It's a hell of a lot of fun. Admittedly, it has been out on PC since last year, but expect to see a PS4 version with a few design tweaks and updates by summer's end according to publisher Double Fine.

68



THE TOMORROW CHILDREN

Developer Q Games
Release Q3 2015
Players 1-4

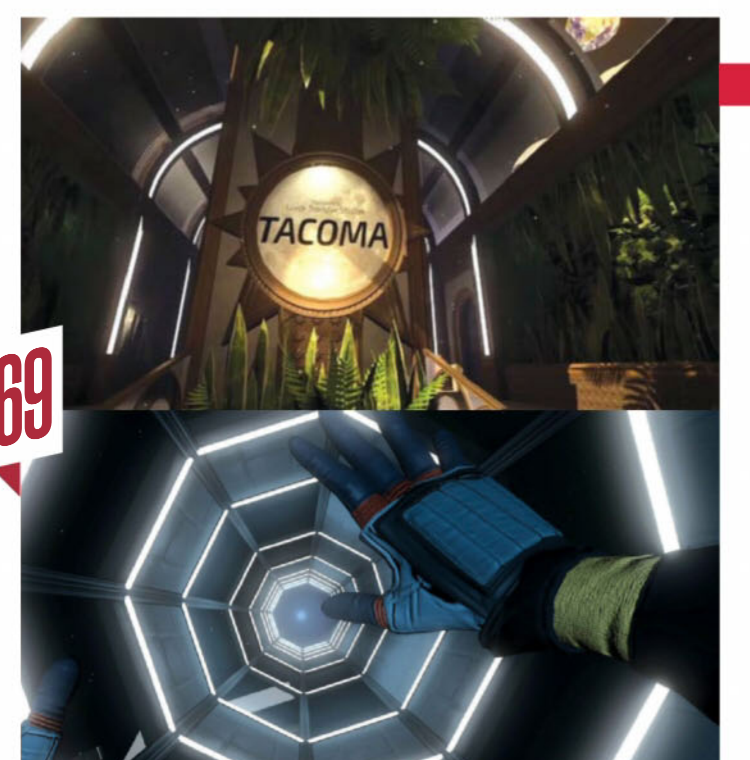
■ *The Tomorrow Children* is a weird and wonderful serving that's part *Minecraft*, part *Animal Crossing* and set in a slickly crafted dystopian-flavoured world. Combining tower defence and strategy *The Tomorrow Children* floored revellers at E3 when Sony pulled back the curtain on its unique visual skillset. Oh, and it's got monsters in it too. Giant monsters. With our senses titillated based on that eye-watering demo, we're intrigued to know more about this one before it ships later in the year.



SHOWDOWN



>> XBOX ONE



69

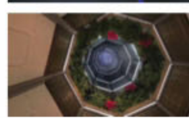
TACOMA

LOST IN SPACE

■ WHAT THE HELL is *Tacoma*? We're not quite sure yet, but what we do know is that Fullbright's sophomore effort and follow-up to *Gone Home* is set 70 years in the future and set on board the Earth-orbiting facility of the same name. You play as Amy Ferrier, a deep space explorer in search of the facility's missing crewmembers. Billed as a 'Walking Simulator' by story editor, Karla Zimonja, *Tacoma*'s aesthetics seem to share a lot in common with the art-deco stylings of *BioShock*'s Rapture. With *Gone Home*, Fullbright wanted to weave a tale of human relationships and here it's doing the same, while attempting to concoct a deep space mystery that plans its narrative through environmental storytelling.

One interesting mechanic that Fullbright says plays a significant role in the story is the digital recordings, devices that help point you in the right direction en route to solving the game's big mystery. "We're letting the player explore the environment on their own, but still letting the environment guide them: 'This might be interesting, over here…' We work in collaboration with the player to help them find all the cool stuff in the game, without forcing their hand," explains Fullbright's Steve Gaynor. With *Gone Home* so revered amongst story hounds, expectations are high for this one.





■ **Above** *Takoma* looks a lot like *BioShock*'s Rapture in design. That's not a bad thing, nor is it a coincidence. Both Steve Gaynor and Karla Zimonja, the founders of Fullbright, worked at 2K Games for a number of years before parting ways with the company to found this new venture.



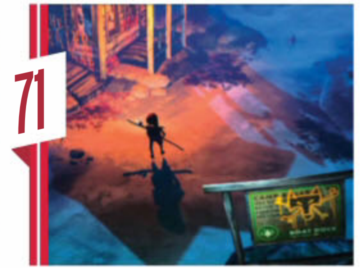


70

CUPHEAD

Developer Studio MDHR
Release TBC 2016
Players 1-2

■ *Cuphead* is cute, very cute, but it's also destined to be absolutely brutal; so brutal in fact that we'd consider it one of the toughest games on display at this year's E3, despite its gorgeously welcoming artstyle. Riffing on the design of Max Fleischer cartoons of the Thirties, *Cuphead* feels like you're playing through a *Betty Boop* reel with *Contra* levels of difficulty. You'll die. A lot, but that's part and parcel of what promises to be one of 2016's jazziest – and certainly most striking – indie offerings.



71

THE FLAME IN THE FLOOD

Developer The Molasses Flood
Release TBC 2016
Players 1

■ Developed by a handful of ex-Irrational employees, *The Flame In The Flood* is a wickedly fascinating little title that casts you as Scout, a lone wanderer travelling down a procedurally-generated river with her canine companion in search of supplies. Featuring a heady mix of perma-death, roguelike elements, as well as looting and crafting, we think this one is shaping up to be something rather special. Here's hoping we don't have to wait too long to test that theory.



72

ARK: SURVIVAL EVOLVED

Developer Studio Wildcard
Release June 2016
Players 1-70 (TBC)

■ How long do you think you could survive in the prehistoric wild with just your bare hands? That's the question posited by the crafty coders at Studio Wildcard in *Ark: Survival Evolved*, a gorgeous open-world sim currently in early alpha on Steam. With up to 70 players running amok in gargantuan maps, coupled with the ability to form tribes and ride dinosaurs, *Ark: Survival Evolved* is something that you really should be keeping a keen eye on over the next twelve months.



73

THE LONG DARK

Developer Hinterland
Release Out now (Game Preview)
Players 1

■ Launched as part of the early access Game Preview initiative, *The Long Dark* is a beautifully brutal study of survival that's trying to spin the genre in a new direction. In it, death constantly peers over your shoulder as you struggle to manage burning calories, hunger and staying warm as the unforgiving elements hammer your senses and you try to stay alive in the wilderness following a plane crash. Despite still being in its early stages, *The Long Dark* is absolutely worth checking out.

74



INSIDE

Release date TBC 2016
Developer Playdead

■ Playdead's follow up to *Limbo* is taking a little longer than the developer anticipated with the game slipping past its Q1 2015 window. The team is working to get *Inside* just right, which given the finely tuned excellence of its last game we're fine with.

75



RIME

Release date TBC 2016
Developer Tequila Works

■ Tequila Works' mix of *Ico* and *Wind Waker* remains one of the indie gems of PS4's lineup, worthy of a place among its triple-A titles. It was a no-show at E3 this year, but what we've seen encourages patience. This could well be worth the wait.

76



HYPER LIGHT DRIFTER

Release date Q4 2015
Developer Heart Machine

■ A game that explores death, sickness, society and the determination to keep fighting sounds like a great place to start for most indie games, and with a little added *Zelda*, *Diablo*, and a touch of Miyazaki, *Hyper Light Drifter* is still looking amazing at every step.

77



EVERYBODY'S GONE TO THE RAPTURE

Release date 11 August
Developer The Chinese Room

■ We've been tracking The Chinese Room's latest for a while, and this post-apocalyptic exploration game is now incredibly close to being done. It's a fascinating twist on convention, and utterly beguiling too.



THE NEXT YOUTUBE SUPERSTARS

■ Inset Legends Of Gaming, from left to right: Twiinsane, ComedyShortsGamer, Ali-A, Dan TDM, Calfreezy, Syndicate, Wroetoshaw, Ashley Mariee

ALI-A TALKS TO US ABOUT BEING THE BIGGEST CALL OF DUTY YOUTUBER EVER AND BEING PART OF LEGENDS OF GAMING LIVE

WHO ARE THE LEGENDS OF GAMING?

■ **Twiinsane** 47,103
youtube.com/user/hallidc1

■ **ComedyShorts Gamer** 4,503,073
youtube.com/user/ComedyShortsGamer

■ **Ali-A** 6,309,356
youtube.com/user/matroix

■ **Dan TDM** 6,822,559
youtube.com/user/TheDiamondMinecart

■ **Calfreezy** 1,771,437
youtube.com/user/Calfreezy

■ **Syndicate** 8,904,391
youtube.com/user/TheSyndicateProject

■ **Wroetoshaw** 4,618,744
youtube.com/user/wroetoshaw

■ **Ashley Mariee** 568,470
youtube.com/user/AshleyMarieeGaming



How did you actually get started producing videos?
I've been putting videos up on YouTube now for about six years, bearing in mind the amount I put up and the intensity of having to put up videos changes over time. About six years ago, January of 2009, I put up my first clip of me just sharing game highlights. This was mainly to share with my friends at school so it was just 30-second clips of me getting crazy sniper kills, lucky kills with throwing knives within *Call Of Duty*.

But, of course, since YouTube is a worldwide platform and people are searching on there for content all the time, people started to come across my videos across the world. It was a very slow process initially – I think in the first year I got about 100 subscribers. It was a long process to build up that audience, but honestly it was never my intention to build an audience; it just started to happen.

You seem to have settled on *Call Of Duty* as your game. Have you experimented with other titles for videos?
I think that the main reason I concentrated on it is that I got into *Call Of Duty* around the same time that I started making videos. I was a consumer, I was going onto YouTube looking for content because I wanted to find out more about the game and see what people would do to play well. I did a few other games, although they were very similar. I did a few games of *Medal Of Honor* on the Wii, ages ago, but *COD* was the game I was getting into. It was where my passion was, where my interest was, and where the interest of hundreds of thousands of people on YouTube was as well. It made sense to have a focus around a game and not alienate the audience with a load of random games.

Have you had any particular highlight working on the channel so far?
People ask that and honestly every highlight is putting out a video that gets a great response. Nothing beats putting a lot of time an effort into a video, putting it out there and seeing everyone loving it and getting a load of positive feedback.

How are you looking forward to Legends Of Gaming?
The focus on this event is us, is YouTubers, which is crazy, and not a lot of other events really put the YouTubers first. Usually it's with YouTubers as an afterthought. This event is all of us 'Legends' coming together this September in London to battle it out, have fun, and meet people who watch our videos. They'll have the chance to see us playing games in real life, which is going to be good fun and for them to have fun in this live situation rather than just on our channels. And also having us come together where we might not normally come together. You wouldn't normally get a *Minecraft* YouTuber playing against a *FIFA* YouTuber for example and that's the great thing about it.

Is there anything in particular you're hoping the event can achieve?
I'm hoping if anything it brings more awareness to Legends Of Gaming in general media and just generates a big buzz and leads well into the next season of Legends Of Gaming. There will be tons of games to play there and hopefully everyone there enjoys it. Hopefully it's an entertaining show with all those Legends on stage and it kickstarts even bigger and better things. I'm really excited for it.

Legends of Gaming LIVE, will be held 3 – 6 September 2015 at London's historic Alexandra Palace



THE PARKOUR PARADISE OF

78 MIRROR'S EDGE: CATALYST

A MASSIVE OPEN WORLD SERVES AS A FREERUNNER'S PLAYING FIELD

DETAILS
FORMAT XBOX ONE, PS4, PC
ORIGIN SWEDEN
PUBLISHER EA
DEVELOPER DICE
RELEASE 26 FEBRUARY 2016
PLAYERS 1

■ THE WORLD OF *Mirror's Edge: Catalyst* is a bleak one, run by an oppressive corporate-based government with an iron fist. There is no freedom and no democracy, only the ways of the Conglomerate or the halls of maximum security prison. Our job is going to be working toward removing this evil head of state and restoring a free world for the City of Glass and its people, and to do so we're going to have to have a little Faith.

This new *Mirror's Edge* features an open world filled with pipes to climb, ledges to leap, and walls to run. Fluidity and flow are paramount to Faith's success even out in the open, and knowing what can and cannot be traversed is key to keeping her moving. The same red indicators from the previous game will serve again as a guide, but sometimes a specific button will appear on-screen instead, giving us a little bit of extra help along the way.

The world holds plenty of tasks for Faith to complete outside of basic story missions, and the preview we played gave us a taste of three of them. Billboard hacking serves as *Catalyst*'s environmental collectible, as Faith can change billboards around the city from Conglomerate propaganda to the symbol of the Runners. Races are time trials that will challenge our parkour abilities in quick spurts. Finally, Combat Runs task us with delivering packages from one courier box to another, but place Conglomerate soldiers in strategic places along the path. These will not only test our parkour but our combat skills as well, rewarding Faith for quick takedowns instead of engaging in full hand-to-hand combat.

While the game features no direct multiplayer, each player's experience is connected to the rest of the *Mirror's Edge* faithful via asynchronous multiplayer. Actions taken in our game may affect the progress of another player across the world and vice versa. Constantly updating online leaderboards will show us who's at the top of the heap in time trials and mission runs and challenge us to complete the same task in a shorter time. We may not have other Runners appearing on our screen together, but the group is active as long as there are other players in the world, and we will constantly be challenged by the friendly competition.

This new *Mirror's Edge* is certainly a catalyst for change in the series, shifting the focus entirely from mission-based gameplay to a free and open world that's limited only by the player's ability to explore it. Plenty of tasks will keep us busy, and other players will keep our abilities sharp by testing our best mission times and forcing us to improve how we play with every try. Considering it's a city that's supposed to be under tyrannical rule, Faith seems to have plenty of freedom to run around and explore, but we're certainly not complaining. We're ready to conquer this urban jungle, and we'll have the chance soon.

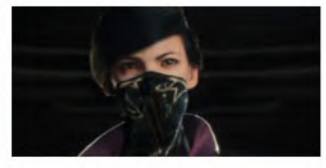
■ *Mirror's Edge: Catalyst* requires us to combine fluid movement and adept combat skills into one strong offense, and it will take all of our gaming skills to do so. This city is no joke, and we'll need to be ready.

79

SOUTH PARK: THE FRACTURED BUT WHOLE

Release date TBC 2016
Developer Ubisoft San Francisco

■ It's going to be tough to follow up on the crazy RPG *The Stick Of Truth*, but we're very excited to see how this sequel plays out.



80

DISHONORED II

Release date TBC 2016
Developer Arkane Studios

■ We only got a glimpse of what Arkane is planning for this sequel, but it looks like we're in for more sneaking around some steampunk settings, which we are fine with.

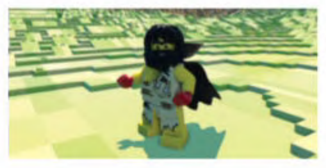


81

BATTLECRY

Release date TBC 2015
Developer BattleCry Studios

■ This curious new game from Bethesda seems like a WWI-set 32-player multiplayer version of *Team Fortress* with crossbows, swords and fists instead of guns.

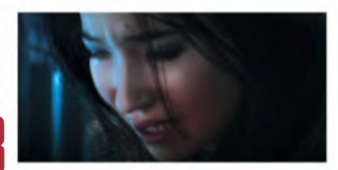


82

LEGO WORLDS

Release date TBC 2016
Developer Traveller's Tales

■ Currently in Early Access on Steam, *LEGO Worlds* has been drawing a lot of comparisons to *Minecraft*. It's the digital LEGO set we always wanted.



83

UNTIL DAWN

Release date 25 August 2015
Developer Supermassive Games

■ This interactive horror experience is looking great. Plus, the branching narrative, where anyone can live or die at any moment, is looking morbidly fascinating.

84

■ A big reason for the Steam-only release of *XCOM 2* is that the team wants to support the game with new content faster than can be achieved on consoles.

"DEATH IN XCOM 2 IS A PART OF THE GAME. HOW DO YOU IMPROVE DEATH?"

■ We were a little surprised to hear that *XCOM 2* is only currently planned for release on PC and Mac after the success of *Enemy Unknown* on consoles, but perhaps the focused development will result in an even better game.







BREEDING REPLAYABILITY WITH XCOM 2

FIRAXIS SENIOR PRODUCER GARTH DEANGELIS ON XCOM'S EVOLUTION

DETAILS
FORMAT PC
ORIGIN USA
PUBLISHER 2K GAMES
DEVELOPER FIRAXIS
RELEASE NOVEMBER 2015
PLAYERS 1-TBC

So how should we expect *XCOM 2* to kick off?
We're very excited about announcing the new game, it's set 20 years after the events from the first game (*Enemy Unknown*) except now the player has lost. They've lost on *Enemy Unknown* and it's their chance to build a resistance and throw down the alien oppressors.

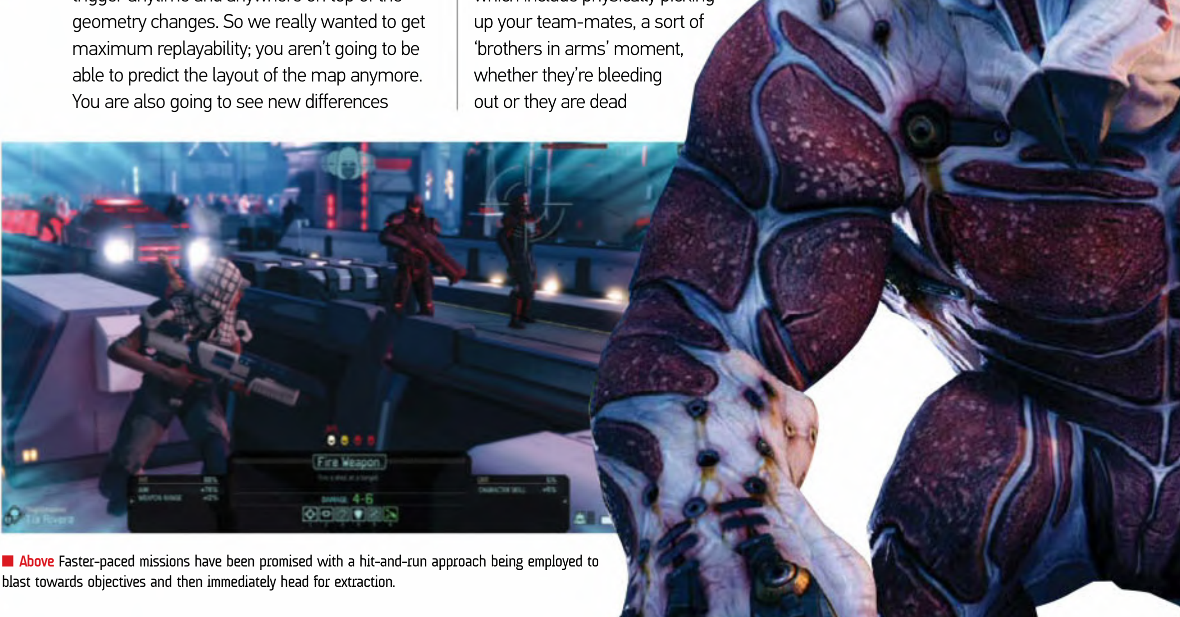
When did you start working on a sequel?
At the end of the last *XCOM* game we saw that the community had taken really well to the *XCOM* games and we got favourable reviews that we are all proud of, so we spoke to the publisher and started working on it at the end of *Enemy Within*.

What are you looking to add that might define this as the new *XCOM*?
Lots of new features, but we are really pushing replayability. We've got procedural maps now. We didn't have that before, so you won't see the same layout twice now; geometry and cover are in different arrangements. You will also have procedural special objectives as well that you will have to perform which can trigger anytime and anywhere on top of the geometry changes. So we really wanted to get maximum replayability; you aren't going to be able to predict the layout of the map anymore. You are also going to see new differences with concealment – you can strike first and create ambushes. Of course we have loads more new cool aliens and weapons too, plus class changes.

Is the setting pretty much the same?
The setting is actually very different. It's based on you losing. And now it's 20 years since the events of *Enemy Unknown*. There are more futuristic elements and as the aliens now occupy earth they've built these massive utopia metropolises, they've cured all the horrible diseases and even stopped petty theft. However, there is clearly something sinister going on underneath, so it's your job to investigate. These cities have a sort of eerie feeling too as they've been created to look beautiful to the human eye but at the same time look very sterile.

How have you developed the use of death in the game? You seemed to love killing our loved ones last time.
[laughs] Yes, unfortunately there will be death in *XCOM 2* but that's obviously a part of the game. How do you improve death? Well we've added more mechanics, which include physically picking up your team-mates, a sort of 'brothers in arms' moment, whether they're bleeding out or they are dead you might want to bring them back to base. Obviously if they're just bleeding out then you can heal them up in the infirmary, but then if they have died you don't want them to go to waste if they've got a load of high powered weapons or armour. You won't get that gear unless you've brought them back with you. We are also adding loot to the battlefield that you will be able to pick up and add to your weapons, like scopes.

And your base, what have you changed about that?
Well, it can now rise up and fly because you are obviously galvanising a resistance. You fly all around the world to make that happen, but we aren't talking too much about that.



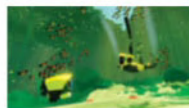
Above Faster-paced missions have been promised with a hit-and-run approach being employed to blast towards objectives and then immediately head for extraction.



85 ABZÛ THE OCEAN OF WISDOM

YOUR NEXT 'JOURNEY' WILL TAKE YOU DEEP BENEATH THE OCEAN





■ **Above** Sharks have more of an appetite for your drones, than you. They'll purposely aim for them, making your life a lot more difficult.



DETAILS
FORMAT PS4, PC
ORIGIN USA
PUBLISHER 505 GAMES
DEVELOPER GIANT SQUID
RELEASE 2016
PLAYERS 1

■ WITH A SIMPLE NARRATIVE of discovery and exploration, as well as its linear direction, *Journey* was a huge hit, and one of the first 'indie' titles to capture our hearts. We still get nostalgic about it. So, what's next? Well, some of the devs split from the group to form the all-new studio Giant Squid, and began development on *Abzû*. The quickest summary of the game is '*Journey* but underwater'. We're predicting that scuba diving will soon be the next exciting trend in video game development. Snorkel tech is bound to be the next big thing.

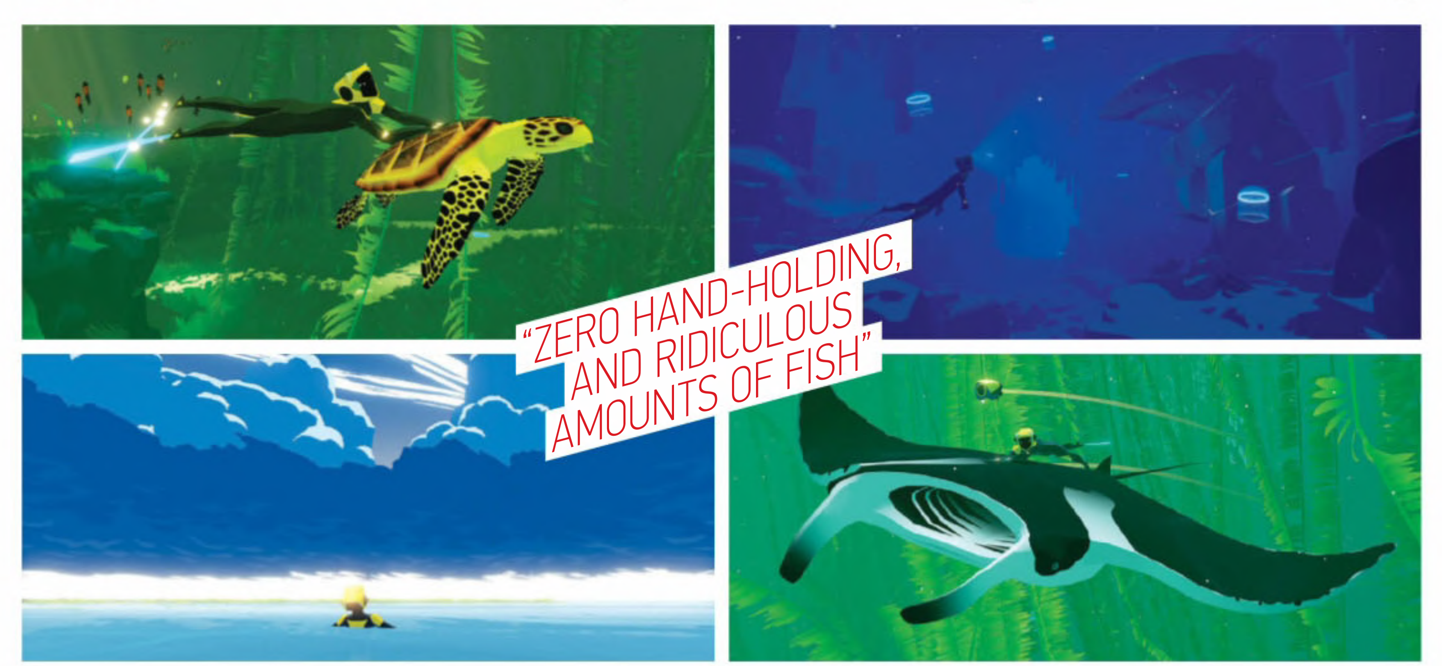
Entirely HUD-less, zero hand holding, no health bar, and ridiculous amounts of fish on screen at one time – the game is once again entirely based on discovery. The only controls you have in the game, other than the crucial ability to swim, is the ability to send out a sonar ping to nearby objects of interest allowing you to discover UUVs (underwater drones) that are hidden under the seabed. You can also latch onto moving schools of fish and even larger underwater wildlife – yes, you may even discover a large great white shark.

You will need drones to get past certain puzzles in the game. They do the hard graft of breaking through the environment, however, sharks don't take too kindly too them. A great white won't necessarily attack you as a player, but is more likely to go for your drone, destroying your chance of moving forward. Some areas will need more than one drone to proceed. Drones may be easy to find – sitting on the sea bed and easy to access – but others may just be out of sight entirely. This is where the game's latch mechanic, which allows you to ride the larger wildlife, comes into play. We latched onto a large manta ray which took us on a path we wouldn't have necessarily discovered. What's most impressive is that the game really doesn't offer any sort of direction; it isn't a linear corridor where you know exactly where you've got to go next – the game's world somehow guides you through, despite the world feeling absolutely massive.

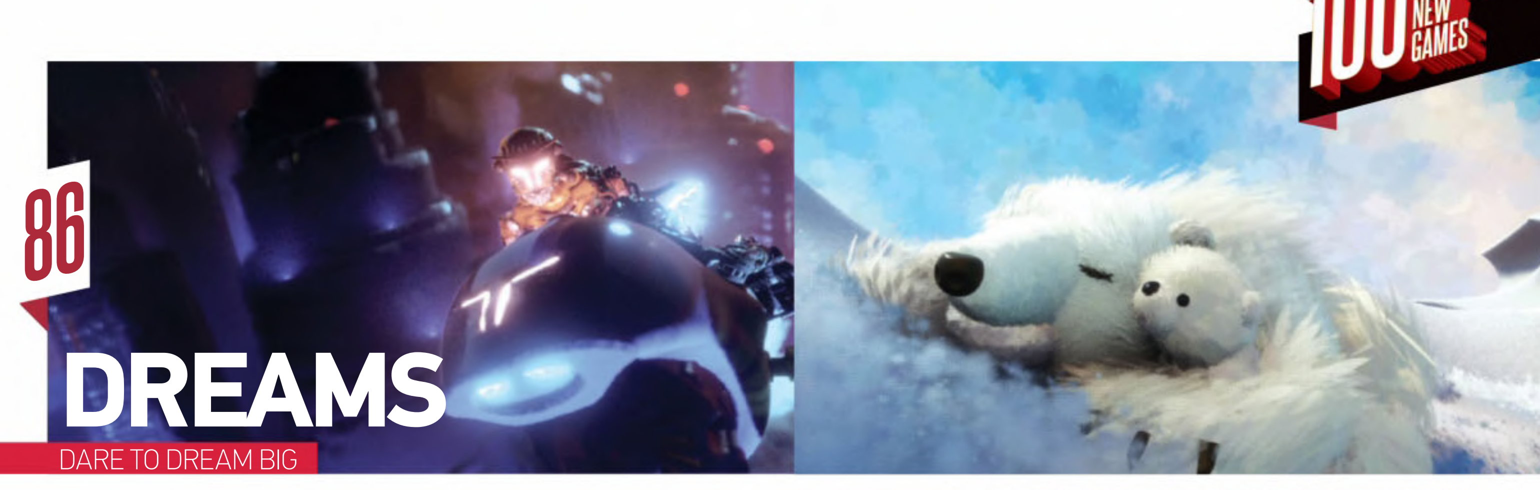
With the wonder of the sea as a setting, Giant Squid has really played with the game's colour palette. Some parts of the deep sea aren't blue and can look as alien as something on an entirely different planet, with some parts almost entirely devoid of light. Yes, you can look above the surface, although you'll find it looks barren compared to the sea. The developer did hint at the idea that you might need to go up top to maybe discover a few hidden treasures, but it wasn't budging on whether this was key to the game's progression. We'll have to find out later.

With a soothing soundtrack and a calm, stylish world, *Abzû* looks like it's going to embody everything people loved about *Journey* in a brand new setting.





"ZERO HAND-HOLDING, AND RIDICULOUS AMOUNTS OF FISH"



86

DREAMS

DARE TO DREAM BIG

IT'S ALWAYS INTRIGUING when a game leaves you with more questions than it does answers, but Media Molecule's latest project, *Dreams*, takes the proverbial biscuit. Ambiguous to say the least, the *LittleBigPlanet* creator seems to be taking a surreal turn with this new title, both in terms of concept and style.

First off, the name of the game isn't just a title: it's what it's all about. Designed around the premise of creating and exploring dream worlds, there will be ones made by Media Molecule for you to delve into, while you'll also be able to make your own. The latter of these two features is what the game seems to be centred around: player creativity, an area the developer has greatly focused on with many of its previous games. This time around, however, things won't be quite as rigid, players being able to make their own worlds not just by using in-game items or set shapes, but by actually free-sketching surroundings. Players will also be able to make characters from scratch, a PS4 controller acting as a virtual brush and puppet master.

Using the controller's motion sensor technology, you'll be able to move your pad around your TV screen and virtually paint images into the game. Once you're done, if you want to make your dream active, which it appears you don't have to, you'll move the pad's cursor and grab what it is you want to bring to life, the dream becoming an interactive playground in the process. According to the developer, you'll also be able to work collaboratively on your dreams, from your home or online, and you'll be able to build on top of others work, the share system not just being centred on completed projects.

Seeing the examples of what has already been built by Media Molecule using *Dreams'* in-game tools is somewhat daunting, the conclusion being that skill and professional practice must surely be the reason for such well-conceived work. However, according to Alex Evans, the games technical director, "anyone can piece together a whole environment in just a few minutes," in *Dreams*, so it seems that the tools will be relatively simple and easy to use. *Dreams* seemingly won't be needing too much technical prowess to build. Evans has also commented that "everyone will feel like a legendary artist within five minutes," which is relieving to know, considering we're no Picassos.

So far, this game seems artistic, bizarre and very interesting, if not a little confusing as to how it will all actually work. Questions we have include: will there be different modes, such as in *LBP*? And will we be able to set goals/targets in our dreams, ones for people to complete? At the moment, we don't know, but what we do know is that we want to know more. Apparently more will be revealed come Paris Games Week and considering the lofty ambitions that *Dreams* seems to have, we'll certainly be keeping an eye out for it during the event.

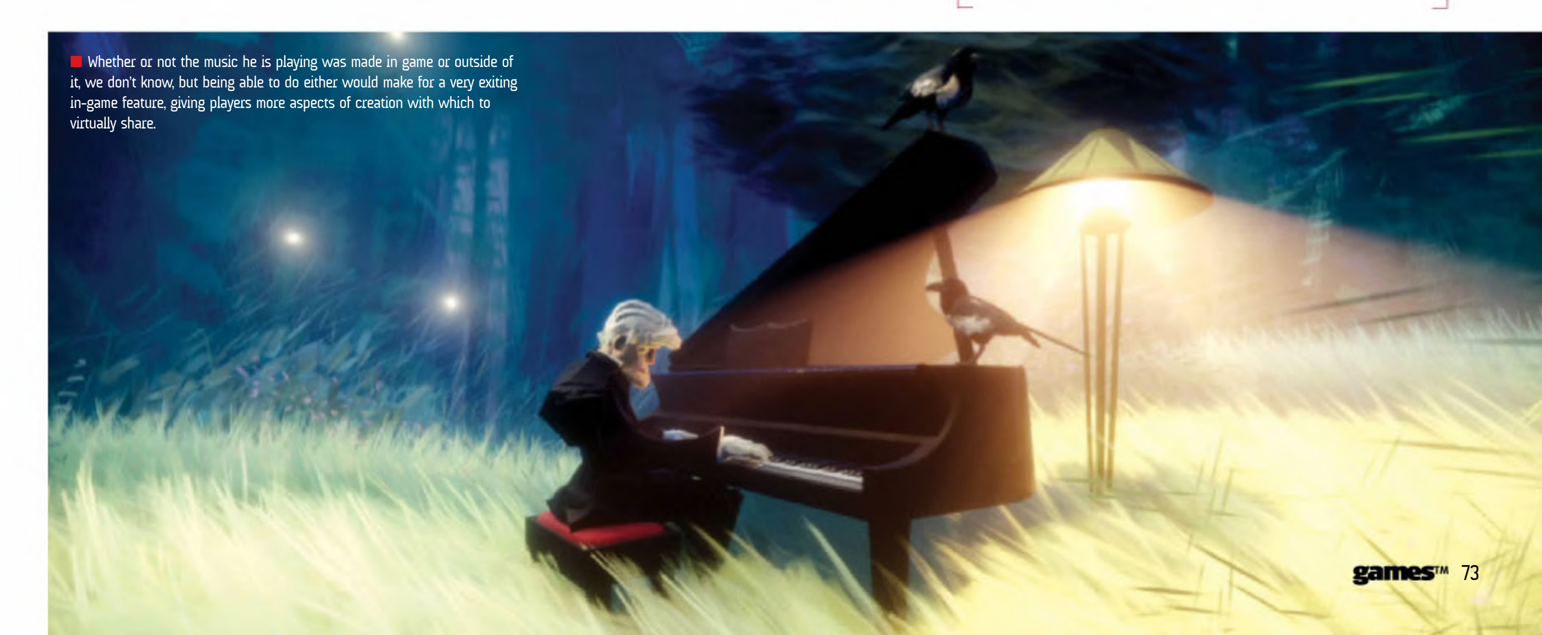
DETAILS
FORMAT PS4
ORIGIN UK
PUBLISHER SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT
DEVELOPER MEDIA MOLECULE
RELEASE TBC 2016
PLAYERS TBC







Media Molecule has been getting closer and closer to giving players full creative control in its games and this is the most immersive yet.



Whether or not the music he is playing was made in game or outside of it, we don't know, but being able to do either would make for a very exiting in-game feature, giving players more aspects of creation with which to virtually share.

TOM CLANCY'S GHOST RECON: WILDLANDS

87

IS THIS THE FIRST FULLY TACTICAL GHOST RECON GAME?

BEING A GHOST LOOKS HARD WORK BUT IT SURE DOES LOOK AWESOME

■ GHOST RECON HAS been a lot of places, from the super hardcore original games to the near-future settings (the less said about *Future Soldier*, the better). *Wildlands* is Ubisoft hitting the reset button, this is a return to the routes of *Ghost Recon* and in fact probably what they've always envisioned as the perfect *Ghost Recon* game.

It's an open world where you can co-op with three buddies in a huge environment and it contains the tactical prowess you'd expect from any *Tom Clancy* game. It's also playable entirely solo, so don't you worry about not having enough friends. Set in Bolivia, you'll be seeing everything from the salt flats, mountainous regions, town markets and even a bit of dense greenery. Sadly though, although civilisation is still going about its daily business, it's also a strong narcotic state with a hugely corrupt government and the cartel are everywhere. As a Ghost, it's your job to sort this mess and take out high profile targets.

Working well as a squad of four was a sight to behold. Interrogate a member of the cartel to gain intel, find out your main target is heavily guarded (you will need to find an alternative route of entry into the camp), so you'd best steal a helicopter, pick up your friends and then have two of them base jump into the camp whilst the chopper offers fire support – if necessary. In fact, the cartels are actually at war with each other, so if you've planned correctly you can cause enough civil unrest that you can sneak in and out unseen. Grab your target, dump him into the back of a car and meet on the salt flats to hand him off to the rest of your squad in the helicopter. Fly off into the sunset, mission complete. Go easy on the duct tape around your hostage's mouth.

Obviously, such a cinematic approach will likely be quite a difficult task to pull off – and you may just have to retry it over a thousand times. That said though, you could always just walk in guns blazing...

DETAILS
FORMAT PS4, XBOX ONE, PC
ORIGIN FRANCE
PUBLISHER UBISOFT
DEVELOPER UBISOFT PARIS
RELEASE TBC
PLAYERS 1-4 (ONLINE CO-OP)



MULTIPLE ENGAGEMENT POINTS

■ A perfect pincer opportunity. You could remain in the hills to offer some sniper fire while a couple of dirt bikes driving through the camp would make a perfect distraction. Or you could do the tactical insertion and go in silent. Oh, explosive barrels too.



SKY DIVE

■ It looks like everyone's favourite point of entry will be via the sky. With a squad of four, why not have two of your guys dive out and basejump onto a nearby mountain where they can stealth their way in? Helicopters can lay down support and also double as an extraction route.



JUNGLE WARFARE

■ Its not just grey and orange on the colour palette. Lush jungle environments will give you a shot of nostalgia for the original *Ghost Recon* games. We've all missed sneaking up on our prey while they wander unknowingly through the jungle.



COMPLETE SILENCE

■ With a day-night cycle in effect, of course the environment will be incredibly different at night. There's also the weather you will have to put up with, storms could mask a gun shot or two, with darkness probably making your job as a Ghost even easier!

88



TOM CLANCY'S RAINBOW SIX: SIEGE

Release date 13 October
Developer Ubisoft Montreal

■ The big news is that TerroHunt is back! You'll also be able to get *Siege* with *Rainbow Six: Vegas* and *Vegas 2* for free on Xbox One, which is a nice addition.

89



PES 2016

Release date 15 September
Developer PES Productions

■ Celebrating its 20th anniversary this year, we're already seeing some fresh polish come through with the latest gameplay. Plus it's signed the Champions League licence for another three years.

90



VOLUME

Release date 18 August
Developer Mike Bithell

■ Mike Bithell's latest is a far more ambitious project than *Thomas Was Alone*, but perhaps more low-key than some might have expected; it's a very pure stealth game with a top-down view.

91

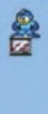


LEGO MARVEL AVENGERS

Release date Q4 2015
Developer Traveller's Tales

■ While what we've seen so far of this game suggests it's a classic LEGO retelling of the two *Avengers* movies, we're hoping it ends up being more of a sequel to *LEGO Marvel Superheroes.*

92


MEGA MAN LEGACY COLLECTION

Release date September 2015
Developer Digital Eclipse Software

■ Containing the original six *Mega Man* games in one bundle along with a mass of library content such as original design sketches, this is a great little reminder of why we fell in love with *Mega Man* many years ago.



93

MIGHTY NO. 9

Release date 18 September
Developer Comcept

A 2D-platformer where you can run, jump and shoot – strictly in a flat plane in the direction you're facing – it's all very *Mega Man*, just redone for a modern audience.



94

KINGDOM COME: DELIVERANCE

Release date Q2 2016
Developer Warhorse Studios

This game is anti-fantasy – it wants to do away with the monsters and magic of recent RPGs and replace them with historically accurate weapons, societies and combat.



95

TEARAWAY UNFOLDED

Release date 8 September
Developer Media Molecule, Tarsier Studios

The smash Vita hit comes to PS4, and since MM knows *exactly* how to take advantage of hardware, expect to be throwing your DualShock 4 around in Sept.



96

VAMPYR

Release date 2017
Developer Dontnod Entertainment

The developer behind *Life Is Strange* already has another game in the works; this time a gothic vampire fantasy and full-blown RPG. Expect a great story with this one.

97

EVE: VALKYRIE

Release date TBC 2016
Developer CCP Games

Eve: Valkyrie has been officially announced as coming to PS4. Imagine it in the Morpheus – actually *in* a cockpit, being flung through the stars at warp speed. Glorious stuff.

CAN UBISOFT REPAIR

ASSASSIN'S CREED'S CREDIBILITY?



98

INTRODUCING EVIE

EVIE FRYE (born 1847) is a master assassin of the British brotherhood, the eldest sibling to her twin brother Jacob. Evie comes from Crawley, but moved to London with an eye to overthrowing the elitist system that has grown embedded into the cobbled streets of the capital. Evie and Jacob took over the Rooks, a group of rebels obsessed with dethroning Templar rule.

TWIN SWITCHING

YOU CAN SWITCH between Evie and Jacob on the fly when you're in between missions, exploring the open world. As we understand it, each character will have missions that can only be completed by them, by using their bespoke skills. Each character has their own unique skill tree that you can progress through, and her perspective gives the narrative of *Syndicate* a whole new duality that might well give the *Assassin's* games the kick in the rump that they need.

ASSASSIN'S CREED SYNDICATE

GOT TO PICK A POCKET OR TWO

DETAILS
FORMAT PS4, XBOX ONE, PC
ORIGIN CANADA
PUBLISHER UBISOFT
DEVELOPER UBISOFT MONTREAL
RELEASE 23 OCTOBER 2015
PLAYERS 1

A TRADITIONALIST

UNLIKE A LOT of the assassin's we've had the chance to play as recently, Evie Frye is actually proficient with their staple armament: the hidden blade. Since the various policemen installed around the capital would arrest anyone openly carrying weapons on sight, Evie prefers concealed weapons: a sword hidden in a cane, throwing knives, that kind of thing. She's the polar opposite of her reckless, gung-ho brother.

99



YOU CAN'T UNDERESTIMATE HOW IMPORTANT **SHENMUE III** IS

WHERE CAN I FIND SOME SAILORS?

DETAILS
FORMAT PS4, PC
ORIGIN JAPAN
PUBLISHER YS NET
DEVELOPER IN-HOUSE
RELEASE TBC 2016
PLAYERS 1

■ *SHENMUE III* IS not a remake. *Shenmue III* is not being made by another company. *Shenmue III* is an honest-to-God sequel – created and overseen by Yu Suzuki, the series' original auteur. According to Suzuki, this game has been circling in his dreams for an amazing 14 years, though he admits 'it won't be easy to bring *Shenmue* back'.

But why should you care? There's three main reasons you should; first of all, the story. *Shenmue* is a tale of revenge – of a young man called Ryo Hazuki who is doing everything he can to penetrate the shady underbelly of Iwao (the company that had a hand in his father's murder). Ryo alienates his friends and family in this quest for revenge, and despite the dodgy realisation of the many revenge tropes in the actual script, the game's refreshing presentation of a story told without cynicism is an incredibly honest tale.

The second draw of *Shenmue* is its ability to draw you into a completely new life: there's a real-time clock running at all times. More recent games (*The Witcher, Skyrim*) make this feel paltry – the in-game clock exists purely to give shape to the day/night cycle – but *Shenmue* is more like the old-school *Pokémon* RPGs, or *Animal Crossing*: you can only do certain things, witness certain events, work certain jobs, at pre-defined times.

Combined with the vibrant, living worlds of Hong Kong and Yokosuka (the previous settings of *Shenmue* games) the game becomes more simulation than RPG: almost every element of city life is recreated. There might be more impressive, more sizable, more fantastical open worlds out there, but *Shenmue* managed to attain this intimacy and domestic nuance that just made the world feel *right*.

Lastly, and importantly, is the combat: Ryo might be only a little bit older than a kid, but he's been raised on some pretty tough streets and he knows how to handle himself (the fact that *Shenmue* originally came from the idea that Sega wanted to make a *Virtua Fighter* side-game RPG speaks volumes for this aspect of the game). The more you fight, the better you get. Get rusty, and you'll feel it in the controls – how many games do that?

Shenmue was a series before its time, and the fact we saw the last installment of the franchise 14 years ago gives us mixed feelings: we're not sure whether Yu Suzuki is going to rely on old stories in the newest game, or whether he wants to keep iterating the game and keep it at the forefront of the open-world RPG. Either way, we know that we're excited about the potential of what *Shenmue III* can bring to the current gaming table…

IN THE MEANTIME…

We're not expecting to get our hands on *Shenmue* for at least another year and a half, so in the meantime, here are some alternative titles that will get you in the mood for *Shenmue*'s glorious return…



YAKUZA ZERO

You might have to buy/import this one from Japan for the time being, but the *Yakuza* games basically picked up where *Shenmue* left off; mini-games, jobs, shadowy figures and personal investigations. It's all there.



SLEEPING DOGS

If you like your Asian gangster games a little more rough and ready, *Sleeping Dogs* might be more up your street: it's *Grand Theft Auto: Hong Kong*, basically, and has some incredibly satisfying gunfights and executions in it.



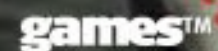
SAINTS ROW: THE THIRD

More off-beat than *Shenmue*, and a damn sight more violent, *Saints Row* takes the idea of an individual surviving in a corrupt society and pulls that logical thread until it's in tatters, attached to a Dubstep Gun or something.



LA NOIRE

If gunplay isn't your thing, you might be better off going into a career in investigations – *LA Noire* will scratch that itch. Rockstar's noir side really came through with the game, despite a few questionable graphic choices.



100

RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER DELIVERS THE GOODS

LARA'S RETURN IS SHAPING UP TO BE EVERYTHING WE COULD ASK FOR

DETAILS
FORMAT XBOX ONE
ORIGIN USA
PUBLISHER MICROSOFT STUDIOS
DEVELOPER CRYSTAL DYNAMICS
RELEASE 10 NOV 2015
PLAYERS 1-TBC

IN GOING BIGGER and bolder with *Rise Of The Tomb Raider*, Crystal Dynamics has embraced the details. While a great deal of attention has been given to the spectacle of the likes of *Uncharted*, it's often the smaller elements that get overlooked. Nathan Drake became a character we could relate to because of the way he was grounded, not only by his persona and conversations, but by the way he felt his way around the world and how his animations changed depending on his well-being. Lara's pushing this to new levels.

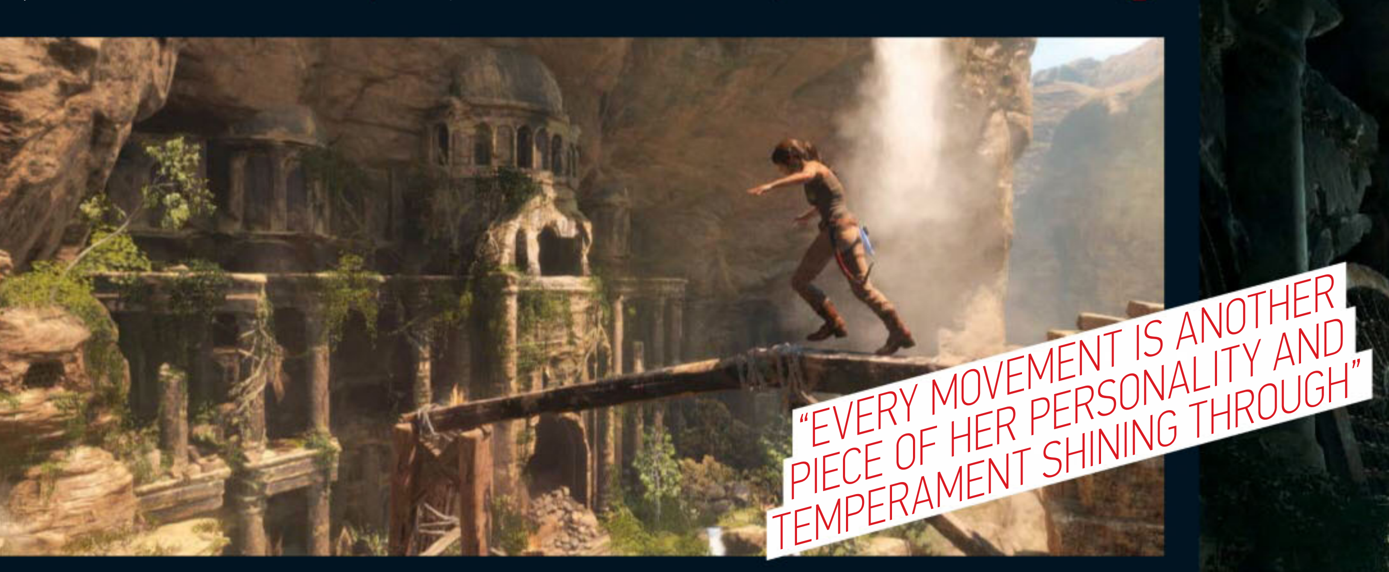
The rebooted *Tomb Raider* is never going to escape comparisons to Naughty Dog's adventure series and given its exclusivity deal on Xbox One, it's a comparison that only feels more apt, but *Rise Of The Tomb Raider* has leapt forward in terms of visual fidelity, animation and characterisation. Lara lurches through snow, stumbling and struggling through the tundra, shivering and clutching her arms. She reaches out to branches for balance and touches the surfaces of walls as she passes them. Perhaps the touch we enjoyed the most was that she will reach out to a camp fire as you pass it, warming her hands and rubbing them together. Small touches, but they really make Lara feel like a real person with natural instincts.

And everything we've seen so far about this game is about Lara Croft alone and her survival instincts. *Tomb Raider* isn't being treated so much as an origin story for this character so much as a traumatic episode that will give fuel to the real origin of the raider of tombs we know so well. This is the game where she's supposed to embrace her thirst for discovery and adrenaline-fuelled, death-defying exploration. She's not quite a woman without fear, but she is a woman surmounting fears and the doubts she might still carry about what she can achieve. Was surviving Yamatai a fluke? We know better, but that's what this game will be looking to disprove for Lara.

What we're introduced to is a character who takes to survival quickly in new and difficult surroundings. It doesn't take long for Lara to fashion a bow, for instance, and that leads us to a glimpse of the crafting and upgrading system this game is using. Every part of the bow can be customised and improved as you find new resources – some common, others exotic – and new arrowheads can be made by grabbing the right elements, allowing for poison gas arrows among other things. She'll also need them to craft bandages to heal wounds for fear of bleeding out.

Stealth still remains Lara's strongest asset as direct confrontations with a bow offer little in the way of security. Distracting guards by firing arrows away from them, throwing walkie-talkies, or flinging a lit fuel canister at them to clear the field are among the options in your arsenal. Even against a massive bear, keeping hidden and striking in intervals is the safest policy. As an extension of this, cover and climbing are done in a very naturalistic way. Lara kicks off the trunks of trees in order to reach branches and swing acrobatically through forests. She approaches rocks, hunched over, ready to hide in an instant.

Every movement is another piece of her personality and temperament shining through. It's character development without dialogue and that's one of the most impressive things about what Crystal Dynamics is doing with *Rise Of The Tomb Raider*. This is a great looking game that is teasing at some fascinating depth and a range of locations that will please older fans of the series. The key elements of combat, stealth and exploration from the reboot look greatly improved and cinematically, it has nailed the high-stakes setpieces from what we've seen so far. This may be the start of Lara's rise, but it won't be the end.



"EVERY MOVEMENT IS ANOTHER PIECE OF HER PERSONALITY AND TEMPERAMENT SHINING THROUGH"

Above Even with the small amount of *Rise Of The Tomb Raider* revealed so far, we're already getting to see a lot more temples to explore, which is what long-time fans have wanted to see most of all from this sequel.



■ Above Everything we've seen of Lara in *Rise Of The Tomb Raider* so far points to a woman who is more in control than she was in the previous chapter. As tough as her circumstances appear, she no longer seems to be daunted by the challenge.

TIME TO GO

■ A smaller Lara reveal that actually caught our attention is the arrival of mobile game *Lara Croft Go*. Those who played and enjoyed *Hitman Go* will have a sense of what is likely to make this game worthwhile as a portable interpretation of the *Tomb Raider* universe. The *Hitman* iteration was a strategy, turn-based, table-top game where you moved Agent 47 around, taking out guards and moving closer to your assassination target. *Lara Croft Go* looks like it will be much more puzzle-focused, but the strict paths of traversal and single tile movement appears to have been retained. With its light musical backdrop and simplified graphical style, *Hitman Go* was a quiet pleasure to play, so we have high hopes for this spiritual successor.



"ALL OF FAITH'S LEVEL DIALOGUE WAS SCRAPPED AT THE 11TH HOUR"



RHIANNA PRATCHETT AND THE ART OF GAME NARRATIVE

WE SPEAK EXCLUSIVELY TO THE MOST WANTED WRITER IN GAMING TODAY

GAMEOGRAPHY
OVERLORD 2007
MIRROR'S EDGE 2008
OVERLORD II 2009
TOMB RAIDER 2013
RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER 2015
OVERLORD: FELLOWSHIP OF EVIL 2015

How did you originally get started working in the games industry?
Originally I started writing freelance games reviews back in 1998 for an 18-24 year-old women's magazine called *Minx*. I then took on a full-time role on *PC Zone*. I worked there for a couple of years before I eventually left to go back into freelancing. That was when I got a call from Larian Studios (the Belgium-based developers behind *Divine Divinity*.) They were working on a spin-off title (*Beyond Divinity*) and were looking for an English speaking story editor. I was a known fan of the previous game and they thought of me. Since I was wondering how I was going to pay the bills, I grabbed the opportunity with both hands and didn't let go.

How has your process changed since you started working in videogames?
I'm not sure I've ever had anything as rigid as a 'process'. Basically I just think a lot, write a lot and edit a lot! I've certainly become more flexible over the years. As I work freelance, I've normally got multiple projects on the go, often across different mediums. That's not just changing gears, that's changing cars!

Most writers we speak to are attached to specific studios. How different is it to work as an independent freelance writer in the games industry?
I would find it very difficult to take on an in-house job because I really enjoy working across multiple projects (and not just game projects either.) I think that strengthens me as a writer, which ultimately benefits those I work with. It does mean I'm not quite as imbedded with a team or studio culture, which can make it harder to keep tabs on how development is going. However, that's balanced by the fact that I can work from bed if I choose to – my winter office!

What sort of things are you looking for when you take on a game-writing gig?
Mainly it's the team's attitude to narrative. Not just saying, "Oh, we think narrative is important", but actually demonstrating that by giving the narrative due care and attention. That means things like having a pre-production phase for the story, investing the rest of the team in the narrative, hiring talented actors, cinematographers and directors etc.

Due to the fact that professional writers in games have only really become a regular occurrence in the last five to eight years, a lot of roles have been for what I call 'narrative paramedics.' These are the people hired towards the end of development when a story isn't working. They end up doing a patch-up job and it can be incredibly frustrating because, had they been hired earlier, they could have prevented these problems from occurring. I no longer take on those kind of roles as they can be quite soul-destroying, but they are still pretty prevalent even now.

Have there been any development teams that you've found just clicked for you in your tastes and working practices?
Definitely the Triumph Studios team who I did *Overlord 1* and *2* with. Working with the *Overlord: Fellowship Of Evil* team at Codemasters has also been good fun too. I also have a great working relationship with the narrative team at Crystal Dynamics as we've been together quite a while now.

Have there been any games that really surprised you with how they turned out compared to what you got to see in the early stages?
You always start a project, or at least the writing side of it, with big dreams. Ultimately, you always know that you're probably going to have to give many of them up during the rigours of the development. Narrative is often the last thing thought of and the first thing pulled apart.

Mirror's Edge was certainly very difficult towards the end. Not only had the game been initially designed with no narrative in mind (meaning that we had to craft a story around the level design) but all of Faith's level dialogue was scrapped at the 11th hour. In my opinion, the story lost a lot because of that. I would have liked to have done all the cutscenes in engine as well, but the time »



Above *Overlord* was doing minions before it was cool, and they were easily the most amusing thing about Codemaster's send up of fantasy game worlds.



"IT'S REALLY BEEN AN HONOUR TO BE PART OF LARA'S JOURNEY"

■ Above *Mirror's Edge* was one of Pratchett's tougher projects having come onto the game later and with limited resources to develop the narrative in the ways it might have gone.

and budget simply didn't allow for it. It had a lot of potential, which I'm sure they'll be drawing on for the next game. As a game writer, your script will have to expand and contract to fit the gameplay changes. That can mean losing characters, levels, even whole acts. It can be pretty brutal and you have to steel yourself against it.

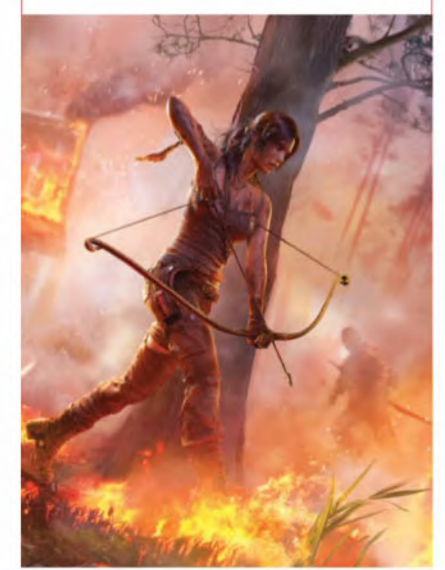
When were you approached to take on the *Tomb Raider* reboot? Was it something that grabbed your interest?
It's Lara Croft, so of course! There weren't so many reboots around back then, so being able to work on the reimagining of such an iconic character really was one of those once-in-a-lifetime gigs. I really loved the new look for Lara and that was something that instantly drew me to the project.



Many seemed to believe Lara Croft had lost some relevancy prior to the reboot. Did you feel the pressure of that when you were writing for *Tomb Raider*?
A little bit, but this wasn't until my name got publicly attached to the game. And by that point I'd done a lot of the writing already.

How will you be looking to develop Lara through *Rise Of The Tomb Raider*?
In the next game, Lara is trying to reconcile what she saw and what she did, with who she thought she was and who she might become. The events of the first game threw her off what she thought was her path and she's still trying to come to terms with that.

Part of that is through following leads that might help better explain what she saw,



■ Above Pratchett is returning to the world of Lara Croft with *Rise Of The Tomb Raider*, continuing the development of the character from the story she developed with Crystal Dynamics.

one way or another. As she's doing this she looks into her past for answers and ends up uncovering even more questions.

What sort of mandate were you given with the character and the ways you could develop her?
It wasn't like Crystal said "Go nuts!" and just left me to it. They had ideas about how they wanted to develop her and were really open to listening to mine. We gelled surprisingly well on how we wanted to depict Lara and her journey.

What does the character of Lara Croft mean to you personally?
I am immensely fond of her. Probably more so than I was when I played my first *Tomb Raider* game. It's really been an honour to be part of her journey.

Since *Tomb Raider*'s release and the hugely positive reception it received, what sort of extra offers have come your way?
Well, more *Tomb Raider* for a start! Alongside *Rise Of The Tomb Raider*, I've also got the opportunity to work with the great Gail Simone on the second arc of the comics with Dark Horse [which picks up where *Tomb Raider* left off], and head up the third arc solo.



> "The uncertainty was amazing; it opened up the world to the possibility of a really tightly designed game that had so many variables in how you could play"

DUSTIN BROWDER, DIRECTOR, HEROES OF THE STORM (BLIZZARD)



WHY I ♥...

STARCRAFT: BROOD WAR

DUSTIN BROWDER, DIRECTOR, HEROES OF THE STORM (BLIZZARD)

“That game was always full of surprises; you never knew what was going to happen next. You were constantly being surprised by the Tech Tree choices of your opponent. You know, you could be doing your own thing and then suddenly you'll be like 'Oh no, he's rushing! This is a rush game! Oh, he's coming! This is a seven-minute game!' or you could realise that your opponent was totally tanking, and it was like 'Oh, so this is a 40-minute game, then?'

That uncertainty was amazing; it opened up the world to the possibility of a really tightly-designed game that had so many variables in how you could play it... I mean, I guess we should have known that from Chess, but y'know... [laughs] People like me never really saw that scope until we saw it in game design, in StarCraft *– giving the player so much freedom with so few tools.”*

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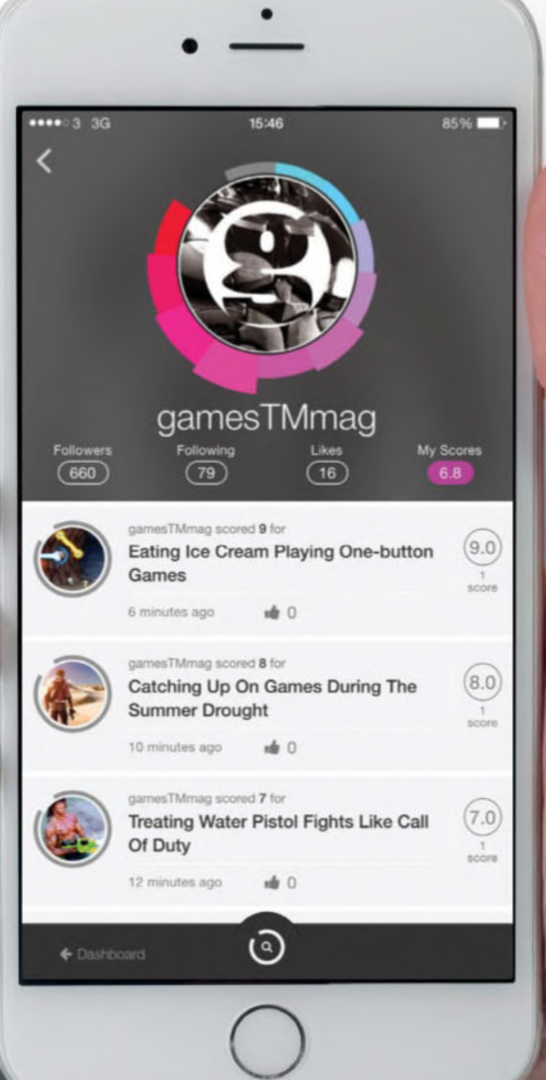




Jon Gordon
Editor

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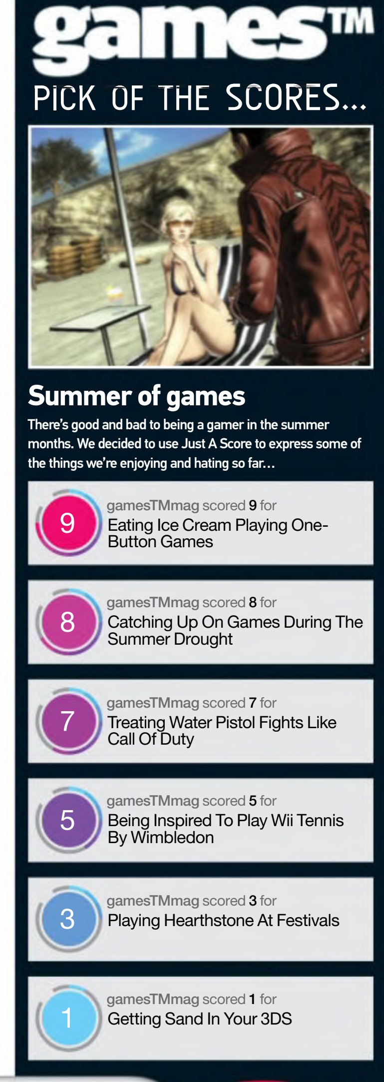




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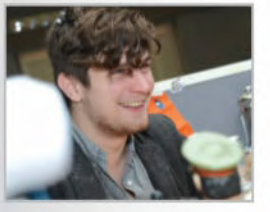
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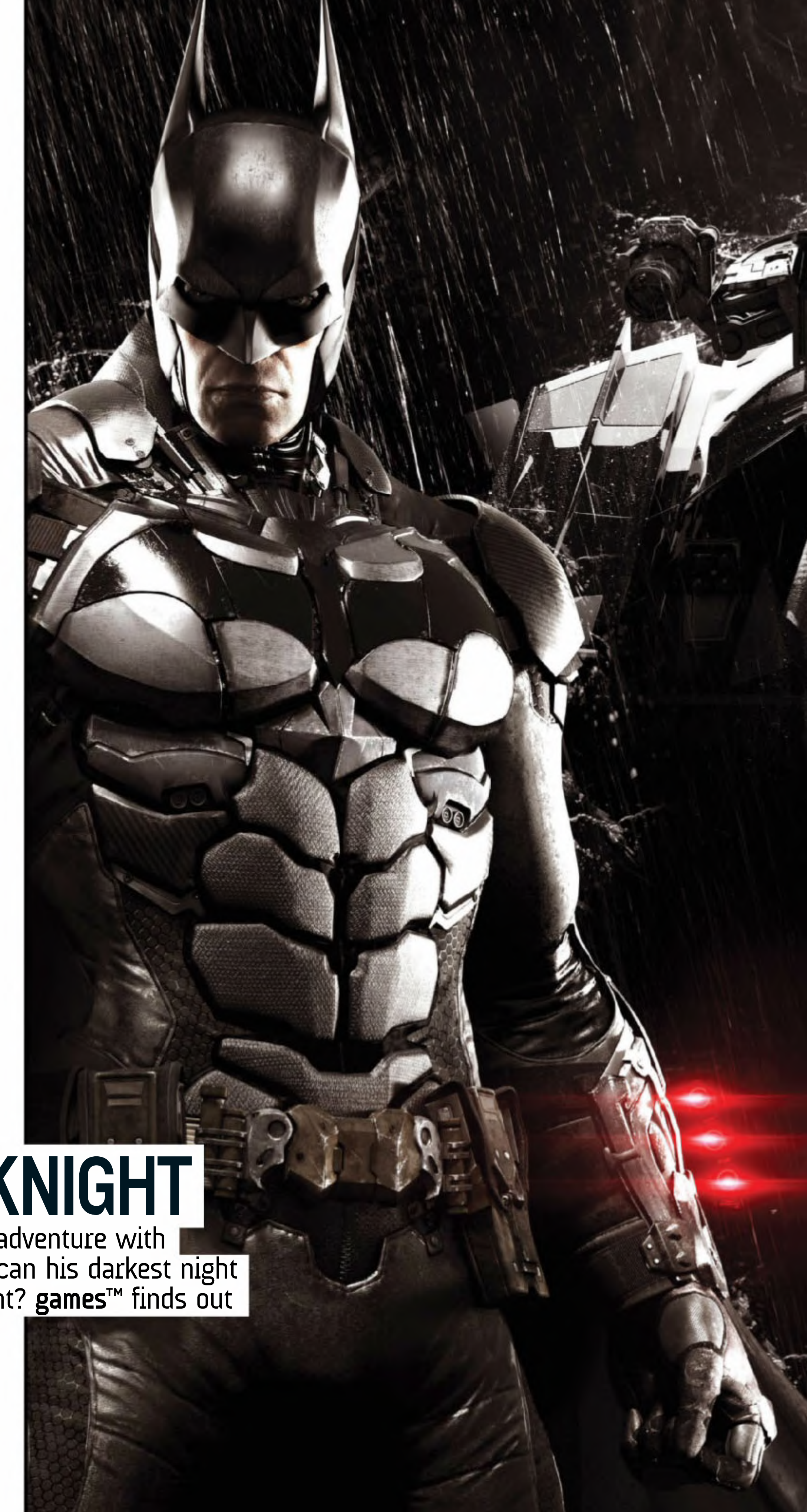
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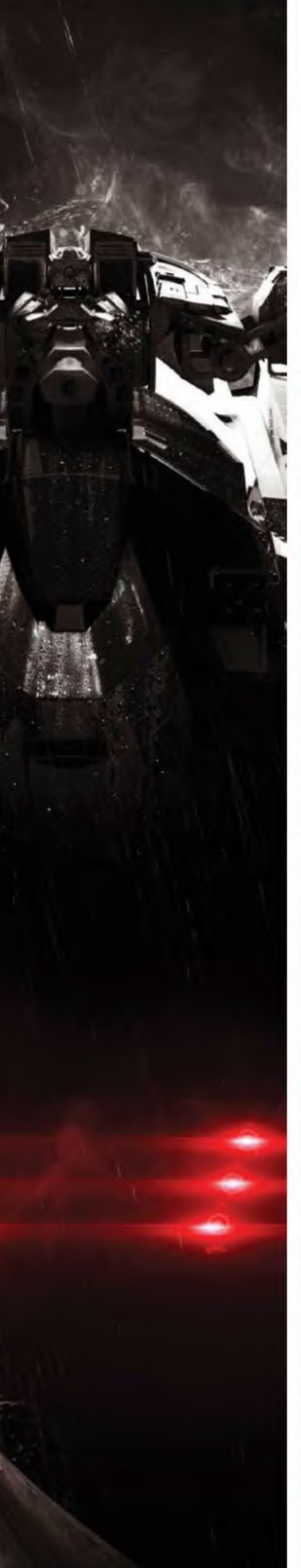
Reviews



92

BATMAN: ARKHAM KNIGHT

Batman's back in his last adventure with Rockstead Studios… but can his darkest night also be his shining moment? **games**™ finds out



THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists, designed to enlighten, inform, and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.

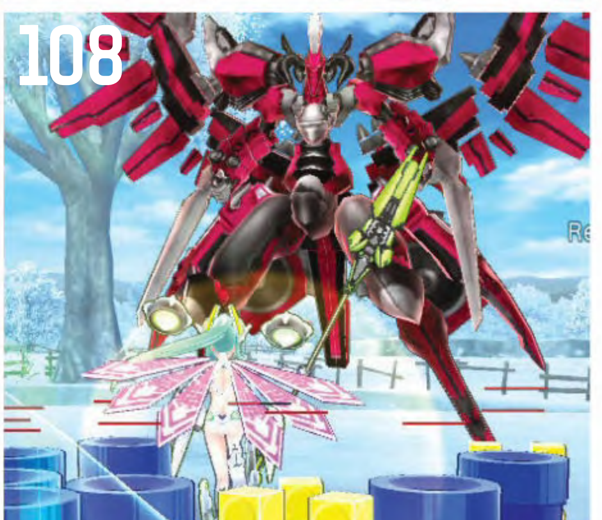












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ROCKSTEADY IS MAKING STRIDES IN CINEMATIC GAMING THAT OTHER DEVELOPERS SHOULD BE TAKING NOTES ON

CAPE FEAR

Batman's cape is as ingrained in popular consciousness as Wolverine's claws or Superman's, erm, big S. Those few billowing yards of fabric are better represented here than in any other *Batman* property (yes, we're going *that* far) and the new movement mechanics have been tweaked to match this new more Bat-like cape. Navigation generally is so fast and loose – in the best ways – that you'll find yourself maligning the Batmobile in favour of soaring Gotham's cityscapes and skylines. And why wouldn't you – it's as good a feeling as swinging from web to web in *Spider-Man 2* way back on the PS2.







FOR THE NIGHT IS DARK AND FULL OF TERRORS

Batman: Arkham Knight

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment
DEVELOPER: Rocksteady Studios
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Left: The city of Gotham puts *Arkham City* to shame, though we do miss the claustrophobic intimacy of *Asylum*. At least the individual levels hit on that for us a little.

The Joker is dead. Batman's most iconic and volatile enemy is out of the picture. So how good can a Batman game be without him? As it turns out, it can be *extremely* good. The struggle between Batman and his erstwhile nemesis can actually be a stumbling block in the way of some much more interesting stories regarding the Dark Knight, but TV, film and comics insist on dragging the unnamed anti-hero back from the dead for the sake of a more immediately attractive story.

Arkham Knight proves that you don't have to do that. The Joker's function as a polar opposite to Batman works as well in death as it does in life. It's not a spoiler to say this – the very first thing you do in *Arkham Knight* is watch the Joker burn, watch the skin peel from his eyes and lips as 'Rocksteady Studios' passes across the screen. This is the last game in a proposed trilogy of *Arkham* games, and Rocksteady and its director Sefton Hill want to say a lot in this wave goodbye (*Origins* doesn't count – it was made by Warner Bros. Montreal).

MISSING LINK

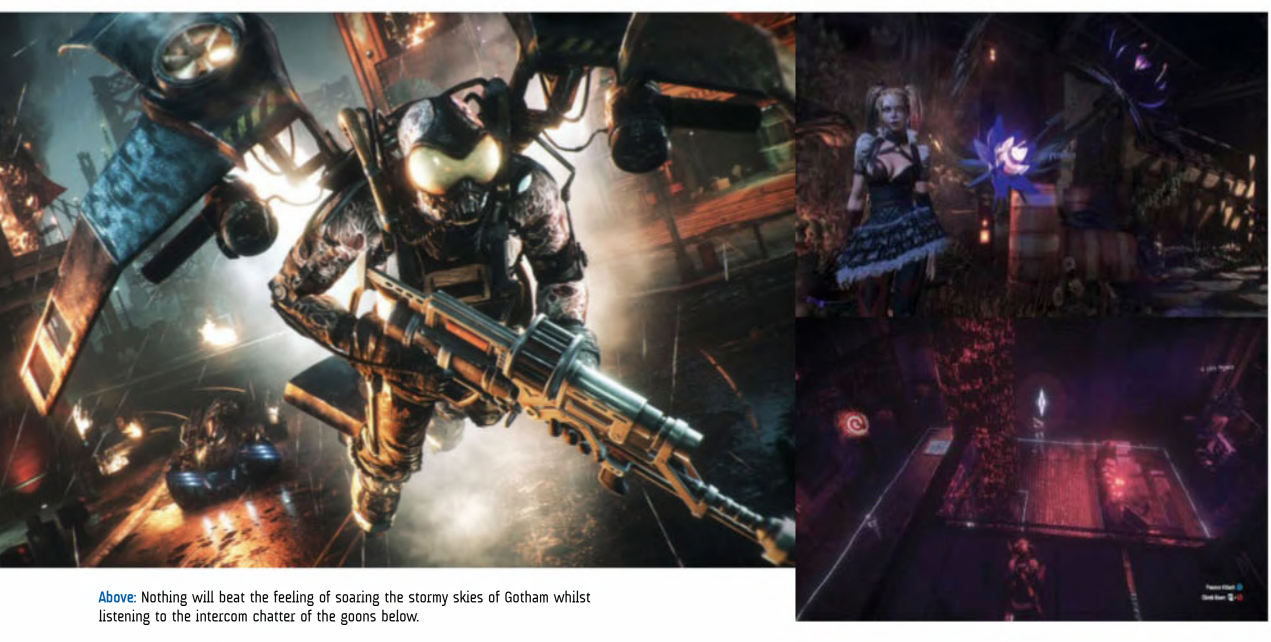
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

WHEELMAN: We like the Batmobile, we do, we just wish that maybe all the car-based combat in the game could have been restricted to its own missions, rather than seeping so heavily into the main campaign.

The narrative begins to distort and set itself up within the first hour – so at the cost of avoiding spoilers we're going to have to talk about some elements rather vaguely. To that end, our absolute favourite thing about *Arkham Knight* is its respectful approach to cinema. That sounds absurd, right? In a game that almost *never* takes you off the stick, the way *Arkham Knight* treats the camera is nothing short of masterful.

It's no secret either that the big bad of this game is Scarecrow – the Fear Gas-wielding lunatic that posed as the primary antagonist in *Asylum*. The way the first game in Rocksteady's trilogy played with psychosis and fear was innovative; messing with perspective and player-oriented control was amazing back in 2009, but it was quickly aped in other games (including the series' inferior entry, *Arkham Origins*, to underwhelming effect).

Arkham Knight reclaims the camera trickery as its own, but rather than the Fear Gas-inspired mind games being confined to scattered setpieces, it permeates the *whole* game. Every



Above: Nothing will beat the feeling of soaring the stormy skies of Gotham whilst listening to the intercom chatter of the goons below.

Left: If you have shelled out for the extra Harley story missions there's good and bad news. The good is it's a fun twist on the gameplay. The bad is that it's incredibly short and basic.



cutscene, every enemy encounter, every time you're navigating the wider world of Gotham… it sounds hammy, crow-barred in, but it isn't. It's actually pulled off in a very subtle and impressive way – self-aware and playful. Supported by some *terrific* voice-acting, it's the most immersive part of the game. The characterisation and writing generally are worthy of a triple-A game: something we find ourselves unable to say very often these days.

From there, we're naturally led to thinking about the game's story: we're writing this just after we've wrapped up the main story, and we're still trying to get our head around some of the conceits. We mentioned the camera play in relation to Fear Gas – that carries on into the general theme as well. The Joker might be dead, but his legacy from *City* is alive and well, and his grip on the minds of the heroes and villains of Gotham shapes this game from beyond the grave.

This is a more intimate story than *City* ever was, and uses the expanded DC cast far better than *Asylum* did, resulting in a more domestic, inviting narrative that genuinely makes you want to race through the game to save everyone that needs saving. For the hardcore fan, heady notes of *Death In The Family*, *Killing Joke* and *The Long Halloween* can be detected within the rich compound that forms *Arkham Knight*'s DNA, all wrapped up with that now-traditional Rocksteady polish. We genuinely forgot about trying to uncover the identity of the Knight at some points, because we were so wrapped up in all the other surprises the game had in store for us. Still, when the time came for all to be revealed… it was a truly chilling moment.

So, that being the most immersive facet of the game, let's talk about the least immersive: the Batmobile. Granted, the *Arkham* series needed something to bolster its explore-puzzle-fight-repeat rhythm, but the car sections do feel somewhat out of place in a *Batman* game… It's thrilling to be able to hop into the car and zip around the streets of Gotham (and it actually makes the whole place feel more 'lived in' and rounded than *Arkham City*'s, um, city) but if you're just playing the Story mode through to see all those twists and turns in Batman's darkest night, you'll be sitting through a *lot* of car sections.

That's the thing, though – if you confine yourself to playing the story *exclusively*, you'll only be seeing the most impressive areas of Gotham City and the shiny new toys that Rocksteady has given Bats to play with. Go exploring, and you'll meet a couple of new faces in the *Arkham*-verse (Man-Bat and Hush, just to name a few [not too spoilerific] additions). Otherwise, your erstwhile helpers Lucius Fox and Alfred Pennyworth will be checking fairly often to drop upgrades on you and give you advice about what's going on during the course of the night.

On that note, it's worth saying that anyone that loved how *Arkham City* dealt with extra-curricular activities is going to feel *very* at home mopping up the Most Wanted side-missions, and anyone that loved the intimate, mind-bending combat puzzles of *Asylum* is going to enjoy tackling the various militia outposts under the command of Deadshot – as you have to use the full gamut of gadgets available to you in the past games, plus you get a few more Bat-toys.

FAQs

Q. WAS I RIGHT ABOUT THE IDENTITY OF THE ARKHAM KNIGHT?
Maybe, but don't even think about it. You'll have more important things to worry about for the vast majority of the game anyway.

Q. IS CATWOMAN BACK?
Yes, and you can play as her for free this time! And the animation on her character model is in-game character perfection.

Q. IS IT PRETTY?
Like nothing we've seen running on the PS4 so far. The new generation is here, and it's full of tyre smoke and rain effects.



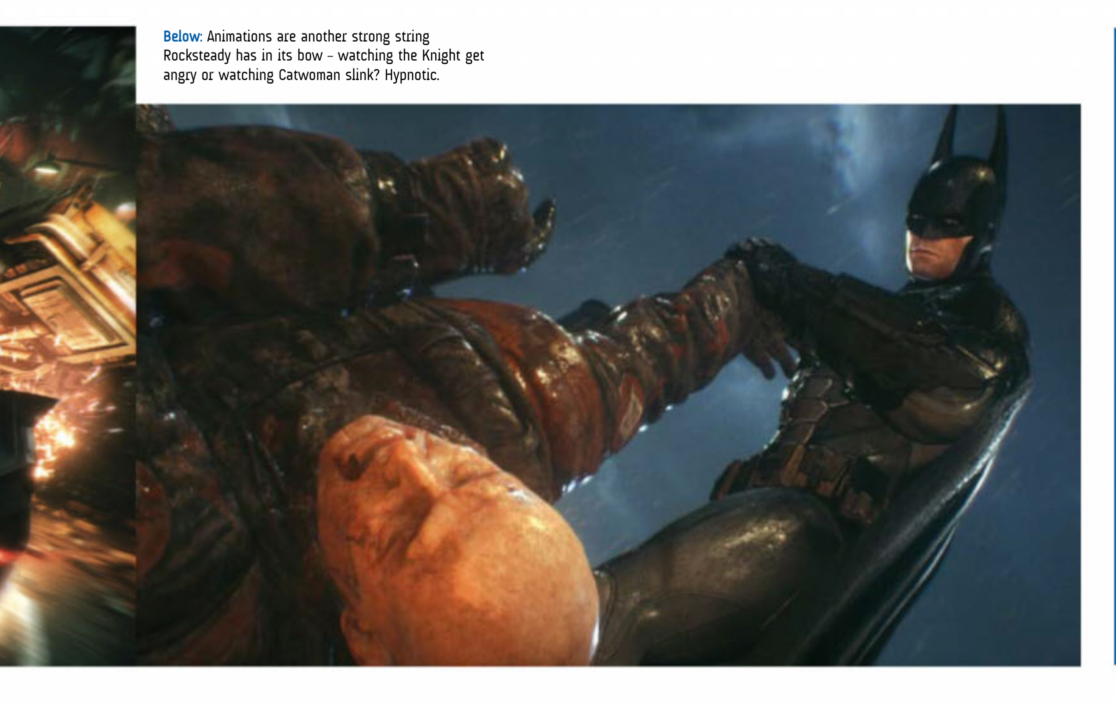
Right: The driving is good (we actually want Rocksteady to pick up the *Twisted Metal* franchise now), but we just wish it had stayed within side-mission confines.



Above: Story revelations abound from the off in the *Arkham Knight*, giving us a deeper and more romantic insight into Batman/Wayne's life, hinting at how and why he got to where he is now…

HEADY NOTES OF DEATH IN THE FAMILY, KILLING JOKE AND THE LONG HALLOWEEN CAN BE DETECTED WITHIN THE RICH COMPOUND OF ARKHAM KNIGHT'S DNA

Below: Animations are another strong string Rockesteady has in its bow – watching the Knight get angry or watching Catwoman slink? Hypnotic.



TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

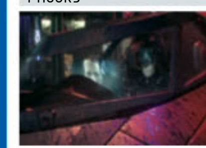
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

30 MINS



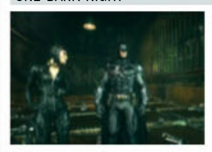
After a great prologue, you're launched into the action. 'It feels *exactly* like *City*,' we thought, disappointed. Then we got the new suit...

4 HOURS



We played nothing but story for the first four hours, ignoring all the extra stuff we had to do. Then Hush piqued our interest, and we were derailed for a whole day

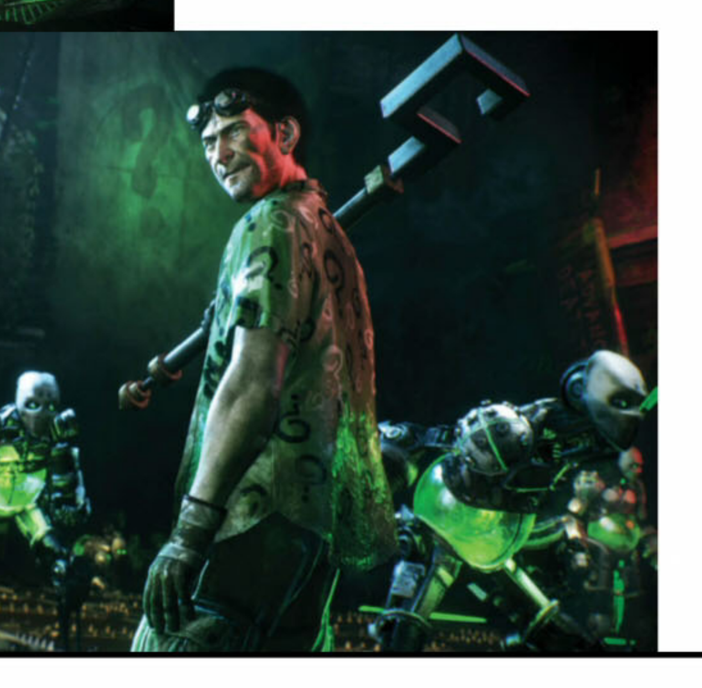
ONE DARK NIGHT



We felt a little emptier, a little hollower as people, as the credits rolled. It's an epic end to an epic trilogy. Eat your heart out, Nolan, you got nothing on this.

BREAKING THE BAT

Arkham Asylum changed the world with its 'free flow' combat – it has spawned many imitators, but Rocksteady has proved time and again that only it can do the system *real* justice. *Arkham Knight* is very un-patronising in its approach to combat; we think the folks over at Rocksteady have expected you to have played a *Batman* game before, there's very little telegraphing on the hand-to-hand stuff, scant explanation about quick-firing pre-existing gadgets in combat and very few prompts that talk about finishing moves or environmental takedowns. Be sure to revise these skills if you've been out of Gotham for a while: you'll absolutely need them later in the game.



The Riddler makes a welcome return, too, his puzzles requiring all of the cerebral gymnastics of the last two games combined. Again, though, the Batmobile sometimes feels like too prevalent an element in the puzzle designs – yes, it's cool, yes, we *finally* get to drive it around, but some of the tight puzzle designs seem to unravel a bit when held against the more intimate Batman-centred stuff.

That said, the Riddler challenges tend to have you paired up with Catwoman – and that's another amazing part of this game: our favourite moments, by far and away, were the tag-team sections. We won't spoil who appears and why, but there are at least three members of the expanded Bat-family that will pair up with you, allowing you to perform dual-team takedowns, explore their unique movesets and here some pretty well-constructed Bat-banter en route.

To unlock the *true* end of the game, you'll have to hit practically *every* completion percentage – so that includes clearing every checkpoint, unlocking every Riddler trophy and hunting down all the miscellaneous villains that have run amok in Gotham this night. And your reward is jaw-dropping. The finale of the game is yet more proof that Rocksteady is making strides in cinematic gaming that other developers should be taking notes on – a player-controlled camera has never felt so natural, so free, so important. This game series was built, it seems, with one core goal in mind – to make you feel like a superhero. *Arkham Asylum* did this physically: Bats was powerful and decisive in combat. *City* did this with its world: you had to prioritise what you wanted to save first, weigh up what it means to be Gotham's saviour. Arkham Knight finally *properly* peeks under the cowl, making you feel not just like Batman, but the broken man that is Bruce Wayne.

If this is Rocksteady's *Batman* swansong, which we have *every* reason to believe it is, the studio is making a point on its way out: it's saying that it's not just Christopher Nolan that can make superhero entertainment dark and relatable, it's saying that not only Marvel can construct properties with limitless appeal, it's saying that superheroes aren't what they used to be. They've changed, adapted for the dark days we live in. Batman struggles during the *Arkham Knight* – he's finally held accountable for his 'above the law' attitude – and Rocksteady has masterfully and knowingly deconstructed the man behind the mask with such aplomb, even Alan Moore would surely give a begrudging nod of approval. This is the best superhero fantasy we've ever enacted, and we're so sad it's over.

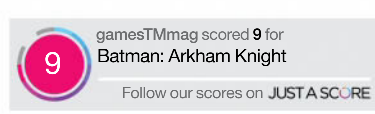
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

LIGHTS, CAMERA & ACTION: We simply can't get over what Rocksteady has done with the camera-play. Combined with the amazing action sequences and lighting engine, it's true cinematography in gaming.

VERDICT

YOU'VE NEVER PLAYED A SUPERHERO GAME LIKE IT





Above: The violence is cartoony and toothless, and while you can run-down nuns with walking frames it's hard to see what caused the original game's ban in a number of countries.

DEATH BY DANGEROUS DRIVING

Carmageddon: Reincarnation

We all have fond memories of games from our childhood. Usually they're subject to that nostalgic enhancement that renders everything a little bit rosier, but sometimes an update or a reboot comes along that's capable of recreating the magic and making us feel young again. That's certainly what fans of Stainless Games' headline-baiting 1997 smash-'em-up, *Carmageddon*, have been hoping for since backing the crowd-funded campaign to bring this franchise back. However, while hope may spring eternal it's also true that for every *Elite: Dangerous* there's a *Duke Nukem Forever*, and as is often the case when anticipating an update of a beloved oldie from yesteryear, you must be careful what you wish for.

From the off, it's apparent that Stainless Games' intention is for the dumb fun of the original game to translate wholesale to 2015. The riotous mix of splattering cartoon pedestrians across the pavement while trying to wreck your opponents' cars remains intact, as does the humour, which is by turns puerile and mildly amusing. There's even the option to achieve a less violent victory by completing laps as if *Carmageddon* were a standard racer. Similarly apparent, however, is that 18 years is a long time, and just as tastes and standards change, so do expectations.

In many ways, Stainless Games simply repeats what it did in 1997 in the hope that it will win us over once more. Higher resolution visuals aside, *Carmageddon: Reincarnation* does little that is new or modern. It gets away with this to an extent because the ped-squishing, car-wrecking free-form racing genre is not one that's overcrowded with entries, but that novelty only takes it so far.

It's not long before boredom starts to set in as environments are recycled a little too quickly and a little too often. However, Stainless does make a fair play at introducing some variety later on in the campaign mode through the use of occasionally interesting criteria that can have you exploring hidden parts of all-too-familiar maps. Meanwhile, the bloody-minded AI seems oblivious to any victory condition that doesn't have it hunting down all other vehicles in an attempt to prang them into submission. This leads to confrontations in which you'll be distracted from the task you're pursuing in order to deal with an opponent who won't let up until you've wrecked their motor; sometimes this makes

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Stainless Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £19.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-6
MINIMUM SPEC: Win 7 64-bit, Intel i3-2100 3.1GHz, 4GB RAM, 1GB DirectX 11 (AMD HD 6000 series GPU or equivalent), 20GB HDD
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

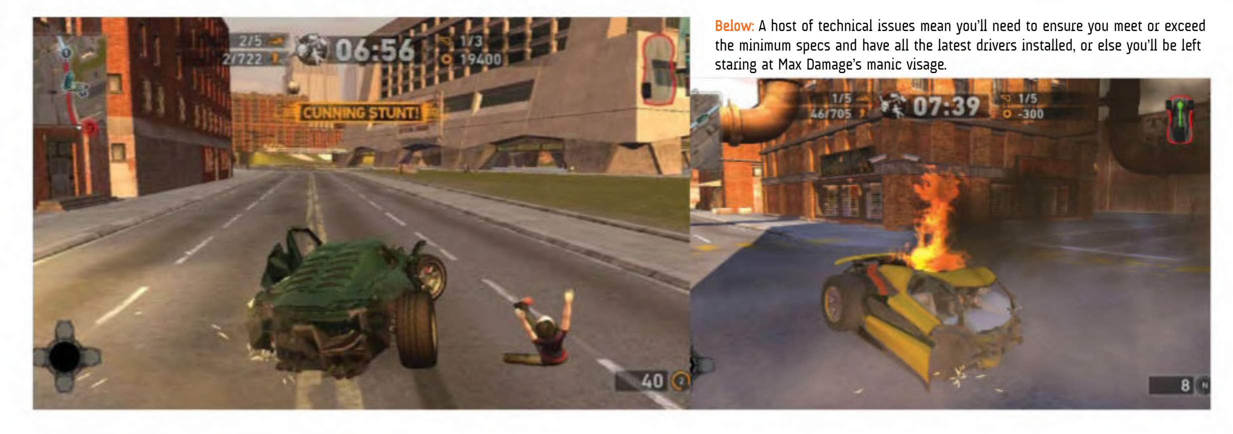
18 YEARS IS A LONG TIME, AND JUST AS TASTES AND STANDARDS CHANGE, SO DO EXPECTATIONS

FAQs

Q. WILL CARMAGEDDON VIRGINS GET IT?
Of course. How entertained they'll be by it is another matter. It's really one for the fans.

Q. IS MULTIPLAYER FUN?
Providing you can find a stable game, it's more fun than single-player. Wrecking another human player's car is more satisfying than the AI's.

Q. IS IT STILL FUNNY?
The basic concept is neither as fresh nor shocking as it once was but it still manages to raise an occasional smile.



Below: A host of technical issues mean you'll need to ensure you meet or exceed the minimum specs and have all the latest drivers installed, or else you'll be left staring at Max Damage's manic visage.

Below: Occasionally, the old magic does manage to shine through and for a glorious few minutes *Carmageddon* is as fun and ridiculous as you remember it. There's always a technical hiccup or reuse of an environment waiting around the corner to spoil it, though.

TECHNICALLY CHALLENGED

PC gamers have grown used to paying little regard to minimum specs, so it was an unpleasant surprise to find that *Carmageddon* doesn't play nice with underpowered rigs. Suffering from technical issues that affect performance and its ability to run, *Carmageddon* required numerous updates and reinstallations before it could be coaxed into action.

Once running, a spate of freezes, crashes and glitches made the opening hours a challenge, though things did improve to the point of being able to play several, mostly stable sessions.



for an interesting challenge but too often it proves a repetitive irritation.

Nonetheless, the damage model here is geared towards producing some amusing results. Doors are torn off, windscreens shattered and body-work crumpled as cars, with engines ablaze, butt up against one another like battle-scarred bull elephants, until one finally keels over. In true *Carmageddon* style this usually means the loser explodes and the victor hobbles away, with a crumpled chassis and wheel or two missing, to wreak havoc another day. The on-the-fly repair system offers a bit of risk-reward as you try to inflict damage on opponents before spending precious points on repairs to your own vehicle, but the generous smattering of feckless pedestrians waiting to be slaughtered help top-up the points counter.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

TIME TRAVEL: The basic concept remains offbeat, quirky and occasionally fun, but the technical issues scream of a title that required several more weeks of tuning before being let out of Early Access.

When you're not repairing your vehicles, which range from monster trucks to souped-up sports cars, you're upgrading them by increasing their potential to deal and absorb damage or splashing out on one of the many upgrades, which can be combined to offer a variety of ridiculous ways to maim, blend and pulverise *Carmageddon*'s foot traffic. Like most of the individual elements of *Carmageddon: Reincarnation*, much of it will feel instantly familiar to those that have played previous entries in the series, which comes as both a blessing and a curse. Less welcome is the range of handling models, which veer from skittish to tug-boat and seldom hit the sweet-spot. If you're looking for a silver lining here it has to be that *Carmageddon: Reincarnation* plays more or less the same with keyboard controls as it does a standard controller, but whether that's a deliberate homage to 1997 standards or a lack of optimisation is hard to discern.

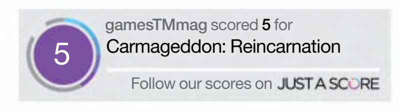
There are some genuine moments of fun to be had with *Carmageddon: Reincarnation*, particularly outside of the campaign where some of the more imaginative game modes offer a focused, more specific goal. Tackled with other players, these begin to bring back fond memories of LAN parties of long ago but there are a number of technical issues that conspire to pop the nostalgia bubble and prevent things really taking off.

So, despite its lengthy stint in Early Access *Carmageddon: Reincarnation* still feels like it's been released several weeks too early. A host of teething problems blighted our early attempts not only to play online but to actually play the game at all (see Technically Challenged), while a general lack of optimisation means that *Carmageddon* is never going to win any sort of beauty contest.

Carmageddon: Reincarnation is not a bad game and neither is it a cynical attempt to revive an iconic franchise. Instead, it's an honest attempt to recreate an experience that many of us remember fondly from almost two decades ago and stands as a love letter to a series that feels like it belongs in a different time and place. Sometimes, such fondly remembered franchises can be revived to stand alongside contemporary greats, simultaneously satisfying our younger selves and our more demanding modern expectations. Sadly, despite Stainless Games' best efforts to recapture the wacky allure of the 1997 original, *Carmageddon: Reincarnation* is not one of those games.

VERDICT

SOME THINGS ARE BEST LEFT TO MEMORY



IF XCOM AND DISGAEA HAD A BABY…

Invisible, Inc.

Your main enemy in *Invisible, Inc.* isn't the goons that populate the levels, it's time. Typically, you think of stealth games as sluggish – you've got to wait, examine your surroundings, move at the optimum times. That's only partly true with *Invisible, Inc.*; sprinting is your friend, you want to dash from cover to cover, lure enemies away from you, scout out your objectives then barrel towards your goal. We take our stealth games seriously (always aiming for that mythical 'ghost' status), but *Invisible, Inc.* makes that practically impossible. And we loved it.

Let's start at the beginning – you initially play as a pair of agents who are being hunted by a coalition of mega-corporations, intent on bringing you and your dying AI companion down. You have 72 hours (in-game) to restore your AI guide to its former competency, or else it's game over: *Invisible, Inc.* will be eradicated for good.

The game can be completed in three hours. But if you're in this for the procedural experiences, you'll stick around for ten times that. Every level is a disaster waiting to happen; it seems simple enough at first – sneak in through the back entrance, pilfer what you need, move on. But *Invisible, Inc.* isn't a stealth game, despite its presentation. It's more like an SRPG with action elements – turn-based movements and procedural generation take away from that old-school *Metal Gear Solid* template that most stealth games have riffed on since. Think *Final Fantasy Tactics* meets *Splinter Cell*.

Adding to that RPG feel is the way the missions are laid out – you're given a list of black sites to strike: do you focus on mods, resources or cash? It all feels a bit *Ocean's Eleven* – you're working your way up the heist ladder until you're prepared for the final take. And what a take it is. We're confident in saying that the final mission is one of the most exciting procedural experiences we've ever played: you can't predict what's going to happen, and our survival hinged on being able to make off-the-cuff, make-or-break decisions. We were one step ahead of failure at every turn, in a way that felt written, planned. But it wasn't – it was the result of some carefully constructed design choices and algorithms, and we're still struggling to believe it was a mission unique to *us*.

The only thing we could criticise? Put in the hours, and you'll quickly begin to understand how the level tiles work – think *Carcassonne*: you know what's drawn from the bag, and how to counter each piece. That's the only thing that dilutes it, if it bothers you, bump up the difficulty and it'll feel like a new game.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Mac/Linux
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Klei Entertainment
DEVELOPER: In-House
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

TERROR INCOGNITA: Your AI companion can hack walls of digital defence in the various corporation offices, allowing you quicker routes through the various levels.

BETTER THAN TRANSISTOR

AS GOOD AS XCOM: ENEMY UNKNOWN

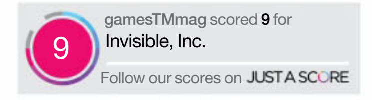


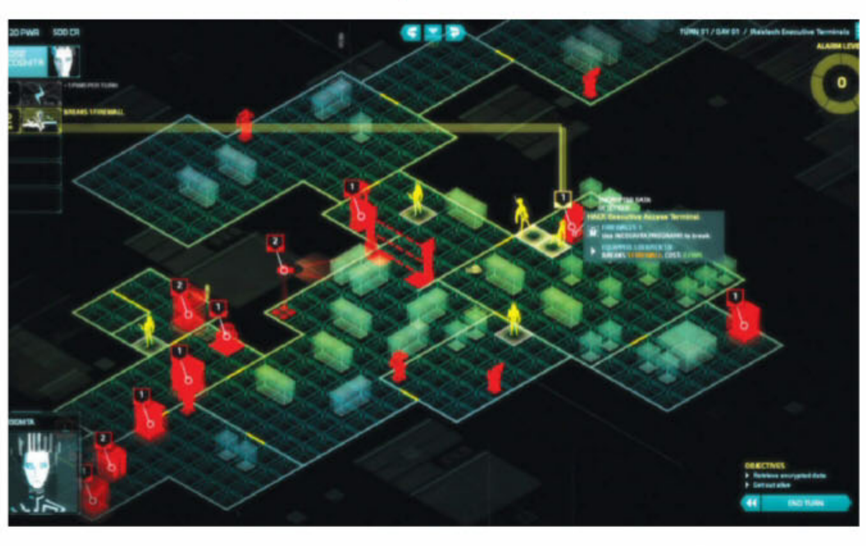
Below: *Invisible, Inc.* is supported by an incredibly strong art style, reminiscent of old-school noir with sci-fi tinges. The perfect presentation for a sleuthing heist game.

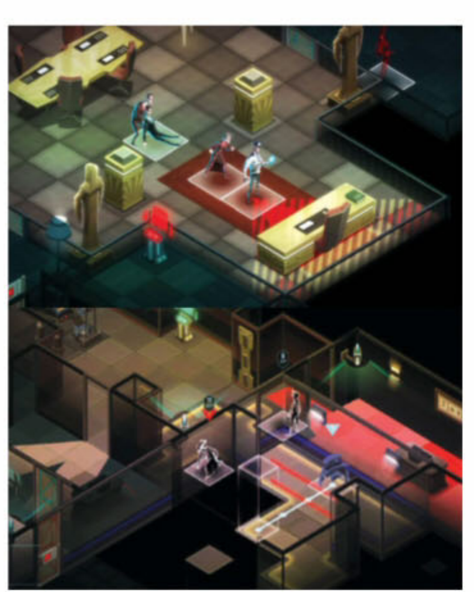


VERDICT

FUSES ITS PARENT GENRES INTO SOMETHING WONDERFUL







Above: Switching to Incognita is a good way of scouting out the overall map and looking for routes – a nice break from the frantic rhythm of the regular game.

DROP DEAD THREAD

Yoshi's Woolly World

It may be hard to believe, but there hasn't been a home console platformer starring Yoshi in 18 years. Not since *Yoshi's Story* on N64 has Nintendo's dinosaur mascot enjoyed the lead role on a home system. *Yoshi's Woolly World*, then, is a bigger deal than you'd expect given the character's involvement in Nintendo's output.

Developed by Good-Feel – the studio behind 2010's Wii platformer *Kirby's Epic Yarn* – *Woolly World* features a similar art style, with characters and environments made entirely out of fabric. Although it's been done before, the effect is significantly more impressive this time around, with the Wii U's HD output making for some truly beautiful backgrounds.

Yoshi himself is an adorable knitted doll, able to unravel himself at any time and morph into new shapes. When he runs his legs unfurl and turn into little woolly wheels, and when he does his trademark flutter jump they transform into a dinky propeller. Enemies are similarly endearing, from the standard Shy Guys and Piranha Plants to the boss enemies, their token weak points sticking with the theme in the form of loose threads or patches.

It's the stages themselves that are the most striking, however. Knitted hills and valleys sprawl out in the distance, woolly clouds hang suspended from thin threads and the sky is a big curtain with visible folds in it. The commitment to the visual style is such that even the in-game effects are made out of materials: when a woolly flame comes out of the ground, tiny sequins represent the flickers.

The art style may be based on *Kirby's Epic Yarn*, but the gameplay is pure *Yoshi's Island*. Anyone familiar with the SNES classic will immediately be at home with *Woolly World*'s central mechanics. As before, Yoshi specialises in eating enemies and turning them into eggs – or in this case, balls of wool – which can then be thrown to hit other enemies or pick up distant items. The aiming mechanic remains as satisfying as it did in the 16-bit days, with the traditional timing-based aim meter requiring just the right amount of skill to pull off accurate shots without becoming too frustrating.

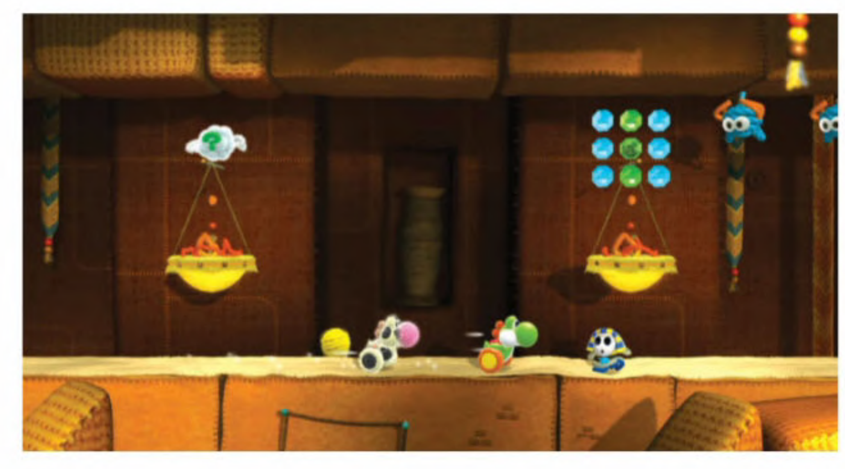
The collectible-focused element of *Yoshi's Island* also remains the central aspect, with each stage containing 20 stamp tokens, five flowers and five balls of yarn hidden away. A stage is not considered truly complete, then, unless you've received four gold stars: one each for collecting all the above, and a fourth for finishing the stage with full health.

It's this focus on collecting, that forms the game's challenge rather than the platforming itself. This is not a game that will test your ledge-leaping prowess to its limit, and veteran platform gamers will be able to breeze through the majority of it without too much trouble. Granted, they'll love what they see, but sanity is guaranteed to be maintained right through to the credits.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Wii U
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Good-Feel
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Right: The world map consists of a large circular central hub that branches out to each of the game's worlds. In the middle are buildings for choosing your Yoshi design and viewing the characters you've encountered in a sort of woolly bestiary.



Above: Scan a Yoshi amiibo and you'll spawn a second, non-woolly Yoshi to accompany you. You control both Yoshis at the same time, which adds an interesting new challenge to the game as you try to keep both out of danger.





Right: Take a moment to enjoy the backgrounds and you'll see lovely little details, like giant balls of wool doubling as bushes in the distance. The folds in the sky are also a delightful touch, proving the handmade look is maintained.

MECHANICS STRONG ENOUGH TO CARRY ENTIRE GAMES ON THEIR OWN ARE INTRODUCED AND THEN DITCHED IN A SINGLE STAGE





FAQs

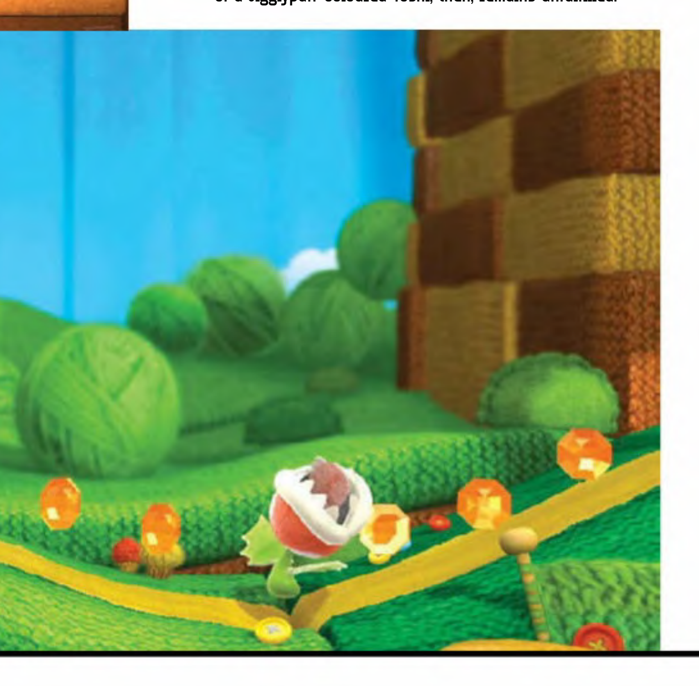
Q. WHAT'S THE PLOT?
Kamek has turned all the Yoshis into balls of wool. Considering they're made of wool anyway it's a bit odd.

Q. HOW'S THE CO-OP?
Fun. You can eat your friend and turn them into a wool ball, which is useful when you have none spare.

Q. WHAT IS MELLOW MODE?
It's an easier version of the game in which Yoshi has wings and can fly for as long as he wants.

DUFFEL GANGERS

There are 56 different Yoshi pattern designs in the game – ranging from a watermelon-coloured one to one that looks like a cow – each of which are unlocked by collecting the five yarn balls hidden in every stage. More entertaining however, is the game's support for around 40 of Nintendo's amiibo NFC figures: by scanning them at any point during the game you'll unlock a special design based on that character. From what we've tested it seems every amiibo released before May is compatible: try anything released after that and you'll instead get a standard amiibo Yoshi design, which is just a green Yoshi wearing an t-shirt with the amiibo logo on it. That dream of a Jigglypuff-coloured Yoshi, then, remains unfulfilled.



Instead, the challenge is in exploring each stage in great depth, trying to find the myriad of false walls, hidden tunnels and collectibles that only reveal themselves when you pass over them or throw a projectile through them. This is a game that rewards you with investigating every centimetre of its beautifully designed levels.

That's not to say things become repetitive, however. *Woolly World* is similar to the best *Mario* games in that each level offers a brand new mechanic to play around with. One stage features a wireframe Chain Chomp, which can be wrapped in wool and rolled around to cause damage, then unwrapped when you need it to spring back to life. Another puts Yoshi in a world of windmills, the missing blades of which have to be knitted before they can be stepped on. In true Nintendo style, gameplay mechanics that are strong enough to carry entire games on their own are introduced and then ditched in the space of a single stage, never to be seen again.

Also keeping things interesting are the occasional sections in which Yoshi transforms into something else for a limited time. Being able to play as a motorbike, a mole, an umbrella or even a mermaid helps break up the flow and prevents monotony.

All this is backed up by one of the finest soundtracks in a Nintendo game to date. The homemade look is perfectly supported with soothing country music, with steel guitars and pianos conjuring up feelings of rural life in southern America. Not the sort of vibe you'd expect from a game about a dinosaur made of fabric, but it fits like a woolly glove.

It's not without its niggles though, the most notable being the aforementioned difficulty. Even though it has a Mellow Mode option designed for newcomers, the standard Classic Mode difficulty is still undemanding. Too much emphasis is placed on the Power Badge system, a throwaway mechanic in which players can buy power-ups with the gems they collect in each level even though the relative lack of challenge effectively renders these redundant.

It's not going to cause you any sleepless nights, then, so if you're seeking a rock-hard platformer to push your abilities you'd be best looking elsewhere. What *Woolly World* instead offers is one of the most visually charming and inventive games you'll see this generation: one that will put a smile on your face, if not sweat on your brow.

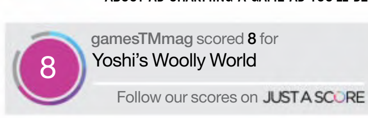
MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

BONUS BOREDOM: Pass the end-of-stage gate at the right time and you'll trigger a bonus mini-game in which you collect fruit for gems, but it's so dull you'll try to avoid it

VERDICT

ABOUT AS CHARMING A GAME AS YOU'LL SEE



CALL OFF THE CONTROVERSY, WE'RE OVER IT

Hatred

The carnage, the glorious, delectable carnage. That's what we're supposed to think right? That's the take-away from playing *Hatred* that we're supposed to get. Unfortunately, what we actually end up with is sheer monotony. An apathy for a parade of weightless violence that rushes by without any kind of message. And it's not like we really need a message necessarily, except that if you're not having fun there really should be another point to playing through a game like this.

You come into *Hatred* expecting a lot, given the hype and controversy that has surrounded it, but that's not this game's fault, and we did our level best as we strapped ourselves in not to allow this to colour our judgement. Whether *Hatred* was seeking controversy with its premise is really neither here nor there. Does it justify itself as a game? Does it have value as entertainment? Frankly, no, it doesn't. There's just not enough on show here to really make it worthwhile beyond some light, puerile, morbid intrigue.

Hatred does a fine job of building up a blood lust, though, in its early moments, and these continue to pop up from time to time, powering you through much of the game. The 'Oh, what will that do?' instinct that the game engenders means that interest isn't completely lost during the couple of hours it will take you to finish the story, but nothing carries all that much satisfaction for long. Whether it's driving a cop car, firing an assault rifle, finding a flamethrower or crashing a train, it's interesting for a while, but never remotely fulfilling. Part of this pretty serious problem might arise from the fact that our demonic murderer delights in the kill, but his motivation is as aimless as the game's at times. It's killing for the sake of killing, which conjures a rather dark curiosity for a while, but is ultimately a hollow pursuit. Perhaps it doesn't need to be more. Perhaps having a deeper message or motivation doesn't necessarily inherently give something more value, but without anything like that it's hard to see whether *Hatred* has any great value at all.

If not thematically, then, perhaps mechanically it has something to offer? At this point you can probably already guess that it does not. As twin-stick shooters go, the action here is noticeably sluggish and repetitive. The core cycle of depravity *Hatred* pins itself on is that you need to kill people in agony (essentially

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Poland
PUBLISHER: Destructive Creations
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Microsoft Windows Vista with DirectX 11, 2.6 GHz Intel Core i5-750 or 3.2 GHz AMD Phenom II X4 955, 4 GB RAM, NVIDIA GeForce GTX 460 or AMD Radeon HD5850, 4 GB available space, DirectX 11 compatible soundcard
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

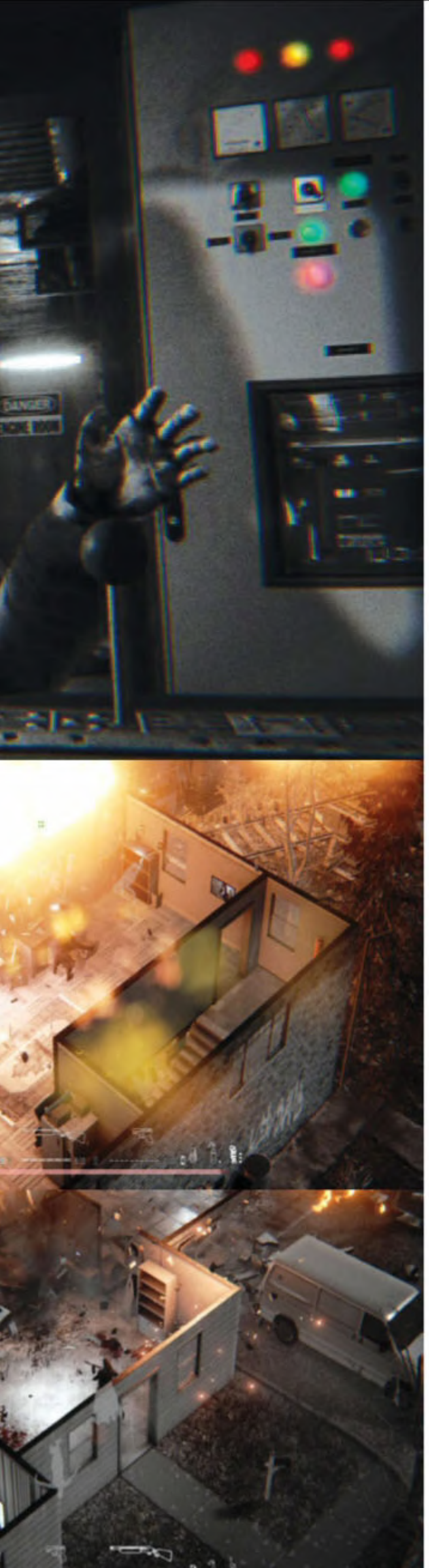


Above: The execution kills can be pretty nasty with knives to the head and shotgun blasts to the face, but somehow they lack punch. How is that even possible? Many games, far less occupied with violence, have done this better.



PLAYING DRUNK

So, there's this toggle in *Hatred*'s options menu that asks 'Are You Drunk?' and from what we can tell (and trust us, we've searched high and low) it does absolutely nothing. Actually, it earns you an achievement for switching to yes, but beyond that there are no gameplay benefits or alterations. It's not a fun in-joke that makes the game any easier or adds auto-aiming or anything like that. It doesn't even add a hazy or blurry filter, or make controls unresponsive like we've seen in other games. It's just an on-off toggle that's supposed to be a gag in and of itself. There could have been a lot more made of an idea like that one, but it goes to waste. It's a pointless feature and if that doesn't sum up our *Hatred* experience we don't know what does.



BETTER THAN



MANHUNT

WORSE THAN



MANHUNT 2

FAQs

Q. IS IT REALLY VIOLENT?
It gets pretty nasty with the execution kills, we have to admit.

Q. ARE WE TALKING MANHUNT LEVELS?
Not quite. In the shocking stakes, we'd say we've seen worse and more creative from games in the past.

Q. IS IT FUN AT LEAST?
It has its moments, but on the whole we'd say no, not really.

prone on the ground) with an execution move to regain your health. Taking on cops, and later military personnel, is about taking a few pot shots and then running away to kill innocents who don't fight back to regain some energy. On higher difficulties *Hatred* offers a real challenge, with you needing to keep yourself alive with limited respawns, leaving enough civilians around to keep you in the fight. You end up trying to game the system, sniping enemies at the edge of the screen, hoping not to be spotted. It doesn't have the trial and error of *Hotline Miami* or the spray and pray of many other shooters of this kind. It attempts to forge its own path somewhere in-between, but it doesn't quite work.

The level design on the whole is mixed. The suburban opening to the game gives you some clues to later difficulties as the monotone aesthetic, while moody and well maintained, means you can easily lose your character behind a wall or in a clump of trees. The train level is a short respite from the meandering and loose open levels that precede and follow it. What is it about train levels that make them so much more potent and often more fun than virtually any other setting in games? It's a perfect playground for mass murder, of course, with a clear line of sight and easy executions all the way down the speeding vehicle. But at this point, it was so simple as to lose all sense of challenge or subversive fun. Now we were just killing because it was easy. Because we could. Whatever blood lust we had managed to build up was quickly dissipating.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

WHAT'S THE POINT?: Is *Hatred* celebrating violence or commenting on it? The fact that it doesn't really do either really means it lacks enough depth to offer satisfaction all the way through.

Graphically, it definitely has flourishes. Splashes of red permeate the darkness and the way explosions light up the world and bring colour to it does do a rather nice job of making destruction feel like a form of creation. The world comes alive with the more death you cause. It's just a shame that's not taken advantage of more. Overall though, some rather buggy camera spins for executions, stupid AI enemies that shoot each other and don't seem to understand how stairs work, wonky car controls that have you crashing into everything and some rather unsatisfying gunplay at times, leave *Hatred* with very little meat on its bones.

FRANKLY THERE ARE MORE GORY AND SHOCKING KILLS TO BE FOUND IN ASSASSIN'S CREED

It doesn't really feel as shocking as it appears to want to be, either. Perhaps this is as much a comment on the levels of violence in games we have already as it is on Destructive Creations' effort. Curb stomping someone to death, stabbing a police officer in the chest half a dozen times or burning someone alive should be wince-inducing. Frankly there are gorier and more shocking kills to be found at the end of combos in *Assassin's Creed* or in melee attacks playing *Call Of Duty*.

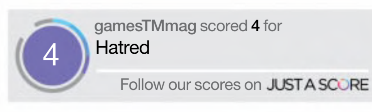
So what's the point? Is it challenge? Is it to sate some inner dark urge? Is it to make a point at all? We honestly couldn't tell you. *Hatred* at times appears to be all of these things and manages to be none of them at all. It is without a point. It fires its Uzi rounds aimlessly and manages to hit nothing. It's not bad, it's not horrific, it's not reprehensible and it's not memorable either.



Above: The train level is one of the game's stronger efforts, but it starts to run out of appeal as the kills just get too easy. Left: We're perhaps not helped by the fact that our nameless, murderous malcontent is about as appealing and charismatic as a rotting block of wood. It's fortunate he doesn't have a back story, because we doubt we would have stayed awake for it.

VERDICT

WALLOWS IN ITS VIOLENCE RATHER THAN REVELLING IN IT





Left: While the game world outside of your farm is pretty sparse, with little to nothing going on outside the odd car whizzing by your land, the animals in *Farming Simulator 15* are surprisingly well crafted.

WATCHING WHEAT GROW

Farming Simulator 15

***Farming Simulator 15* is a truly peculiar experience, one that is both weirdly relaxing and perplexing in equal measures.** For one, we're as yet unsure of the true appeal of this bizarre gaming sub genre that's shifted millions of copies and is considered the most-played farming simulator the world over.

In a nutshell *Farming Simulator 15* thrusts you headfirst into the world of simulated agribusiness, tasking you with a multitude of objectives, such as harvesting crops, woodcutting, managing a plethora of livestock and, naturally, turning a profit, in order to purchase an array of machinery rendered in exquisite detail.

That last line is not intended as a cynical jibe, the farming vehicles in Giant Software's latest iteration are indeed fantastically crafted, right down to the superbly detailed interiors that showcase switches, knobs and buttons in all the correct places (we're told). Shame then that a number of other elements haven't been lavished with the same care.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PS3, PS Vita, Xbox 360, Xbox One, 3DS
ORIGIN: Switzerland
PUBLISHER: Focus Home Interactive
DEVELOPER: Giant Software
PRICE: £44.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-6
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



Culprits? Irksome loading times, a frame-rate that dips in and out, a game world that's sparse in detail outside of your farm, and a tutorial that's both exhausting and off-putting in equal measure. Controls are fiddly too; the L1 and R1 buttons need to be combined with numerous other button taps to access the vast array of gameplay options on offer resulting in many wrong actions.

It seems that unless you had the actual know-how as to how farming life works you'd be at a loss. Of course, this is niche gaming, and Giant Software must be doing something right because the series' fan-base has been steadily growing since its inception back in 2012, and people continue to fork out their hard earned cash for the pleasure of selling bags of spuds.

Worry not casual fans because *Farming Simulator 15* features a chainsaw, and every game that shoehorns a chainsaw into its code is immediately improved, right? Well not quite, because this freshly concocted albeit somewhat enjoyable mechanic is a cumbersome mess even at the best of times thanks to a poorly designed cutting mechanic.

It's an acquired taste, and if its appeal lies solely with those of you yearning for a title that allows you to get behind the wheel of wondrously modelled tractors and farming machinery, then this is absolutely the game for you. For the rest of us, it will continue to remain a mystery.

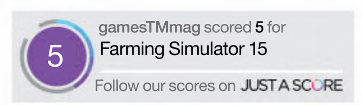
WORLDWIDE

TAKING GAMING ONLINE

FARM FRIENDS: Farming online has been added to the fold. It's an intriguing option hampered by a lack of in-game chat, and an annoying sync bar that systemically pauses the game.

VERDICT

A WEIRD EXPERIENCE THAT DESCENDS INTO BOREDOM





Above: Real life machinery has been lovingly re-created by the team at Giant Software, and it's clear countless hours went into crafting the machines in digital form.

A PALATABLE SERVING

Nom Nom Galaxy

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Double Eleven
DEVELOPER: Q-Games
PRICE: £11.49
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



Alongside a brief synopsis, *Nom Nom Galaxy* fails to truly sound all that original. Here's a sandbox experience about gathering resources, expanding a structure of your own creation and defending said structure from aggressors; a description likely met with derision and apathy. But don't let its *Minecraft* or *Terraria* familiarities ward you off, underneath the core concept is a tantalising game.

The idea, ultimately, is to make soup. The resources you're to gather are either for the soup factory itself or the ingredients for your recipes. When many of these ingredients fight back, however, the game becomes a little more hunter/gatherer than it might first appear, with skirmishes away from the security of your defensible base to gather up new, rarer and more valuable soup options to expand your inventory. This isn't quite as creatively driven an experience as, say, *Minecraft*, and instead offers up a strict progression system of different levels, unlocks and new recipes. It's all the better for it, however, giving you a new challenge to encounter and solution to discover each time.

The factory system itself manages a fine balance between accessibility and depth; there will be a good deal of learning involved before you begin to master the systems involved, which makes the inclusion of campaign stages and object unlocks all the more imperative. It relies heavily on automation, but also the speed of your work and a smart approach to the changing market. It's a compelling and rewarding set of gameplay systems.

These mechanics are a little over-complicated, however, since creating such a system isn't always reliable or manageable. Transporting your ingredients from a purpose-built garden, for example, often isn't as simple as having a robot pick up a harvested item and plop it on a conveyor belt. Instead you'll need a robot to throw the ingredients, have them collected and moved slightly to the left or right and then flung back down (or up) to be transported to the soup machines. It lacks the necessary range of options to simplify the process, an oversight that means it's not always possible to build a simple, nearby plantation.

It's jarring mechanics are a little too unnecessarily complex, but those who often find themselves drawn to the subtle puzzles of similar strategy and simulation games will have plenty to chew on here.

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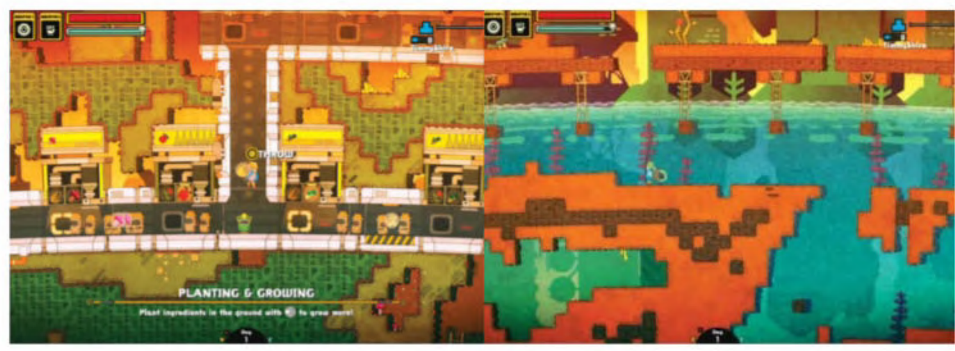
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

MORE, MORE, MORE: The idea of creating an automated soup factory is fascinating, but the automation only works in specific situations and for certain ingredients. More of this is needed.



Above: Combat is the weakest aspect of *Nom Nom Galaxy*, but luckily there are turrets you can purchase to make it a little more manageable. Most early waves in each stage will need to be fought by hand, however.

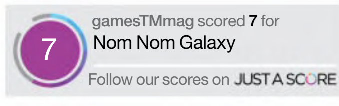




Above: If you like the idea of building an automated soup factory it might be better to get the game on PC instead.

VERDICT

AN IMPERFECT STRATEGY GAME WELL WORTH THE TIME



"TOLD YOU I'M NEVER GOING BACK"

Payday 2: Crimewave Edition

No-one punches the air when they drive into a tree in *Forza*. No-one feels good when they die in *Battlefield* to a distant sniper with some hideous MLG gamertag for the third time. No-one wants to hoof the ball out of the ground in *FIFA*. But *Payday 2* is a weird game in that it's at its best when players are at their worst.

That's because when carefully-planned heists fall apart, *Payday 2* hits the right notes between manic improvisation and escalating chaos. As a team of four robbers, you choose from various heists that range from smashing up a shopping mall to sabotaging ballot boxes to breaking into art galleries. There's a stealth component to each heist, where the emphasis is on careful planning and gently prodding at the level design out of the watchful eye of security guards or CCTV cameras. The elusive gold standard is pulling off a heist without a single alert, a lofty goal that demands trial and error, the right mix of character perks and some luck.

What usually happens is a mistake is made – it could be a passerby spotting you picking a lock, it could be your trigger-happy friend opening fire – and heists become a desperate attempt for survival, as you're forced to fight alerted cops and SWAT teams. You have to fend off waves of snipers, bulldozers and cloakers among others with small elements of hostage negotiation and resource management also thrown into the carnage. Add the slow dripfeed of new weapons, weapon modifiers, experience, cash and masks to the constant itch to improve stealth tactics for each heist and secretly, *Payday 2* is one of the best horde modes ever made.

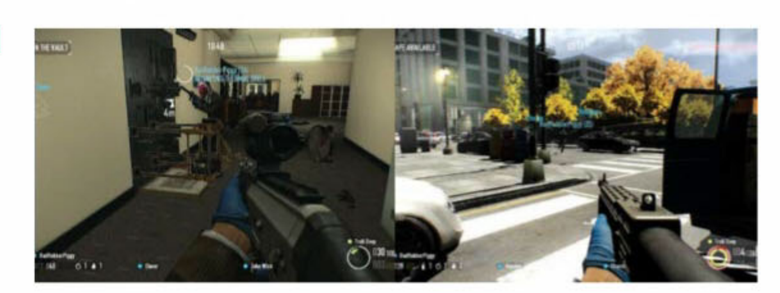
This being the *Crimewave Edition* means console fans get new characters (John Wick!), missions (Hotline Miami!), masks (Black Death!) and weapons (Gecko Assault Rifles!). This also benefits from all the patches that the PC version had, with extra content added and balance concerns ironed out. But didn't PS3 and Xbox 360 owners get those updates too, you may be wondering? No they didn't, and this brings us to a big concern with *Crimewave Edition*. Support for last-gen console versions dwindled shortly after release – with Overkill blaming ageing console architecture, which seems reasonable – but hope that current-gen versions will receive more support hasn't been bolstered by the crippling online problems the Xbox One version suffered on launch, as any attempts to play with random players online crashes the lobby.

Overkill has made all the right noises about fixing the problem, which should (*should*) be gone by the time you read this, but it's still a worrying false start for a series that's always been in need of extra polish and now finds itself burdened with mistakes of its past. Great game when it works like it should – but is that a disclaimer we should really tolerate?



DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS4
ORIGIN: Sweden
PUBLISHER: 505 GAMES
DEVELOPER: Overkill Software
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



BETTER THAN

BATTLEFIELD: HARDLINE





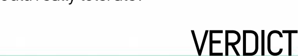
LEFT 4 DEAD 2

WORSE THAN

ENHANCED

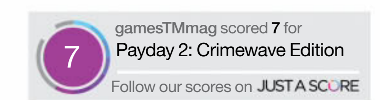
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

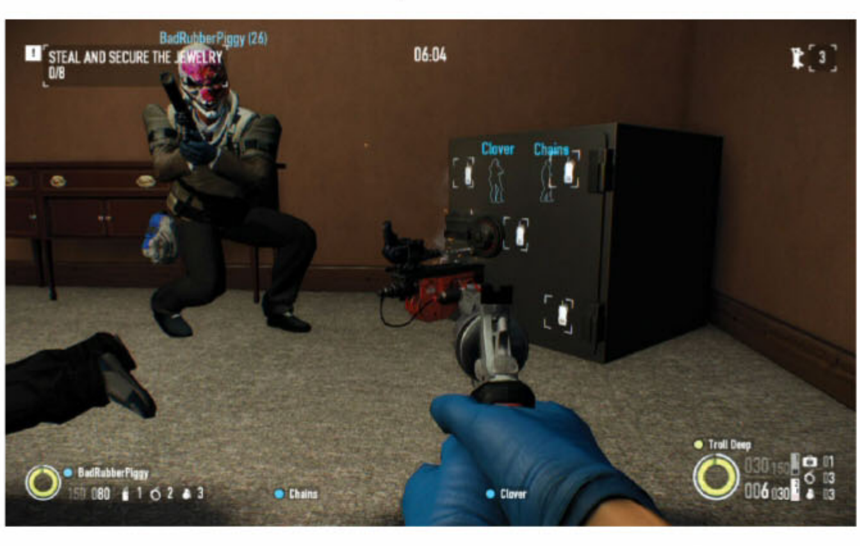
EXTRA CONTENT: From tweaked difficulty to brand new heists, there are 50 patches (!) worth of content here that lifts *Crimewave Edition* above the vanilla edition of *Payday 2* for last-gen.



VERDICT

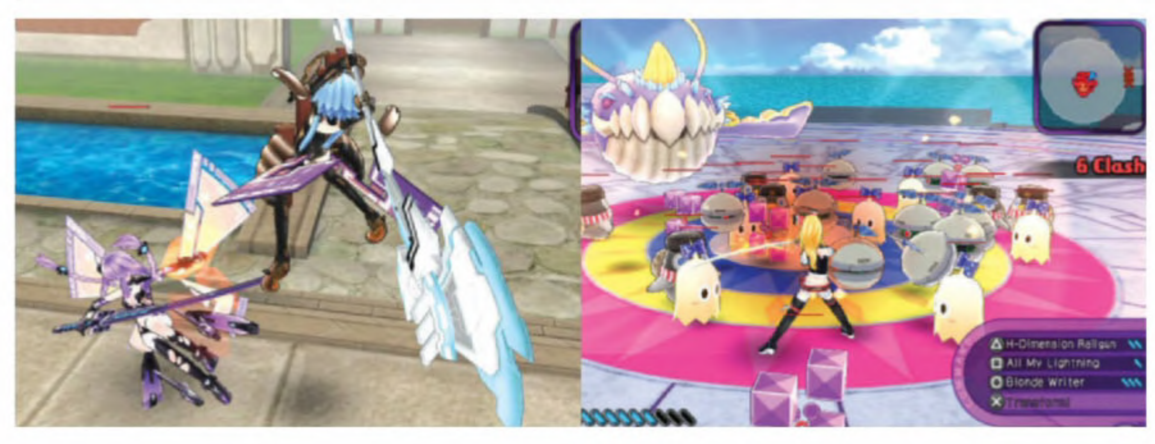
FANTASTIC GAME STILL MARRED BY ANNOYING ISSUES







Above: Another technical hiccup comes from the three- to four-second pause that often occurs when a player joins the heist. It's not a problem during stealth mode but it's annoying and a real pain if it occurs during gun battles.



Left: The series' parodising of the games industry extends to its enemies. Those blocks that are not-at-all-based-on-*Tetris* are surprisingly tough, too!

GIRLS JUST WANNA HAVE PUNS

Hyperdimension Neptunia U: Action Unleashed

The *Hyperdimension Neptunia* series is dangerously close to being a one-note joke drawn out over seven (and counting) games. That gag being the consoles we know and love, re-imagined as anime girls and oh look their clothes fell off.

Yet while *Hyperdimension Neptunia U* (confusingly, not a Wii U game) indeed stretches this 'satire' of the games industry almost to breaking point – the taut stress marks showing with the introduction of two new playable characters based on Japanese gaming mags, reporters Dengekiko and Famitsu, whose investigation of the main four heroines serves as the story's starting point – it also impresses with a drastic gameplay departure for the series. In short, it's surprisingly good.

Where most previous entries in the franchise have been JRPGs, this is instead a *Dynasty Warriors*-style musou. The game breaks down into short quests, with up to two characters playable per mission. Some require slaying a set number of enemies, others surviving boss onslaughts, while Irregular Quests add a puzzle element, demanding you figure out how to complete the area yourself. They're usually simple, but both battle and puzzle stages are suited to the Vita.

The plot behind the missions is thin, but the hack/slash gameplay is remarkably on point. Hammering at light and heavy attack buttons will get you through most quests, but to achieve the top rankings there are actual combos to learn, along with energy gauges enabling special moves and transformations into more powerful HDD Forms to monitor. Action Unleashed may appear facile, but it packs a lot in for players willing to look beneath the surface and learn its secrets.

It's little surprise that Tamsoft resorts to the slightly creepy cliché of having the characters' clothes tear in battle. Tear-free outfits can be unlocked, but you still might want to shield the screen on the bus.

The ten playable characters – the four main girls Neptune, Noire, Blanc and Vert; their little sisters Nepgear, Uni, Ram and Rom; plus the reporters – also have duo skills that can be unlocked by improving their relationship. Pair up any two regularly and their Lily Rank increases, triggering bonus dialogue sequences and powerful new attacks. Although the challenge veers wildly in places, requiring spots of level grinding, the pace is such that you won't mind.

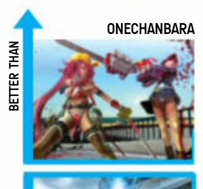
With an arena battle mode activated upon completing the campaign, plus new weapons and costumes to unlock, there's more to keep your attention than you'd likely ever expect. Cheesy titillation aside, this is very possibly Tamsoft's best game.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS Vita
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Idea Factory International
DEVELOPER: Tamsoft
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

ONECHANBARA





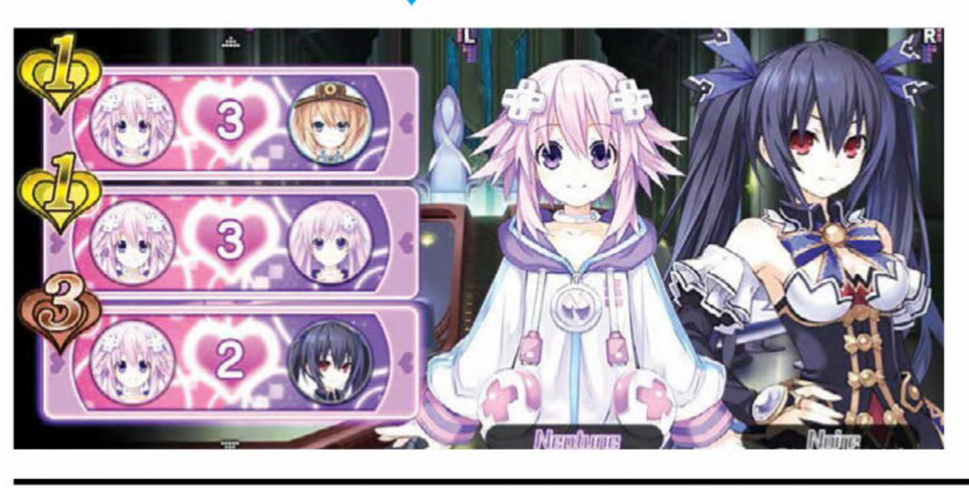
HYRULE WARRIORS

WORSE THAN

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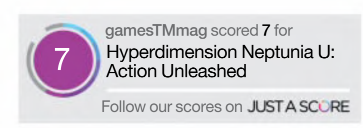
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

CHALLENGE US: More consistent difficulty would do *Hyperdimension Neptunia U* absolute wonders – quests going from requiring level 7 to level 26 is really very harsh!



VERDICT

EXCELLENT PORTABLE ACTION – JUST HIDE THE SCREEN



NOT QUITE A SHEPHERD'S DELIGHT

Sunset



Above: The game begins as you prepare the apartment for Ortega's arrival, a great way of showing the passage of time as he slowly turns it into a home. It's perhaps the only subtext that *Sunset* manages, and is great for exploring the idea of our own naturally evolving lives.

***Sunset* has a lot to say.** It talks of war, of art and culture, family, home and responsibility. It talks of race, gender, wealth, privilege and society as a whole. It talks of love. In a fashion comparable to *Gone Home*, *Sunset* is less a game and more an interactive narrative - and whether that's a criticism or not will come down to your personal tastes. As with *Gone Home*, you're tasked with exploring an environment, uncovering often mundane details to build a sense of character and watch relationships build and unravel.

As an American engineer finding herself working as a housemaid in the fictional Latin America country of Anchuria as it becomes embroiled in civil war, your role in the game is simple: visit the penthouse apartment of one Gabriel Ortega once a week, tick off various tasks he sets and – ultimately – let the story play out. You have some semblance of interaction; though you never meet Ortega, his identity can be found in the home as you respond to notes or interact with objects. The game terms it as 'warm' or 'cool' responses, essentially binary choices between professional or emotional. Do you clean away the toy soldiers, or arrange them into a pyramid? Will you dust the trophy of merit, or the artifact of culture? Often these actions ignore the fact that player character Angela Burnes is a paid housemaid, but for the sake of the narrative it's easy to overlook her either/or decision making. Move the telescope or the small statuette? Technically it should be both, but that's not an option here.

It's all an illusion, sadly, and not one that plays out all that successfully. The apartment itself is small, restricted even more by automatically locking doors, ensuring you don't waste any time in rooms that don't feature new content. It means each new week is a hunt for the few new interactions available, turning *Gone Home*'s sense of exploratory reward into something a little more tiresome. It's the lack of reward or notable responses that leave you feeling underwhelmed; when asked a direct question, there should be a recourse of some kind for your answer. When devoting time to learning the piano, is it not fair to hope to gain more than a small grey box telling of a Steam Achievement being unlocked? *Sunset* offers little of that, turning each week into a list of chores to complete. There's no sense of reward, thereby making interactions all but useless, inevitably leading to a sense of boredom. And as important as its points are, it's just trying to say *too* much; it becomes an overbearing checklist of simplistic social commentary.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Belgium
PUBLISHER: Tale Of Tales
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: i5 CPU or equivalent, 4GB RAM, 1GB GPU, 2GB HDD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

AS GOOD AS: DEAR ESTHER

WORSE THAN: GONE HOME

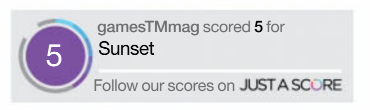
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WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

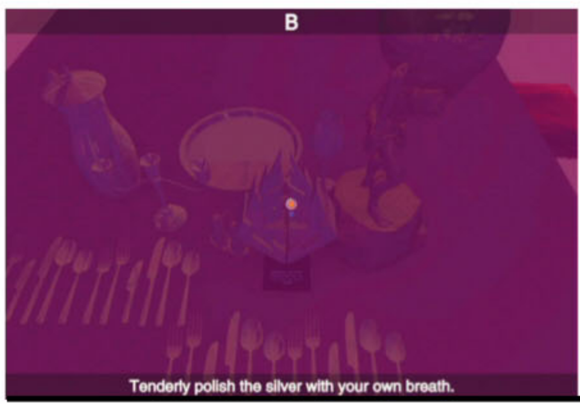
NEXT WEEK ON… If *Sunset* was going to include an back-and-forth relationship like Angela and Gabriel's, then it needed to feel like your actions have an effect – however subtle.

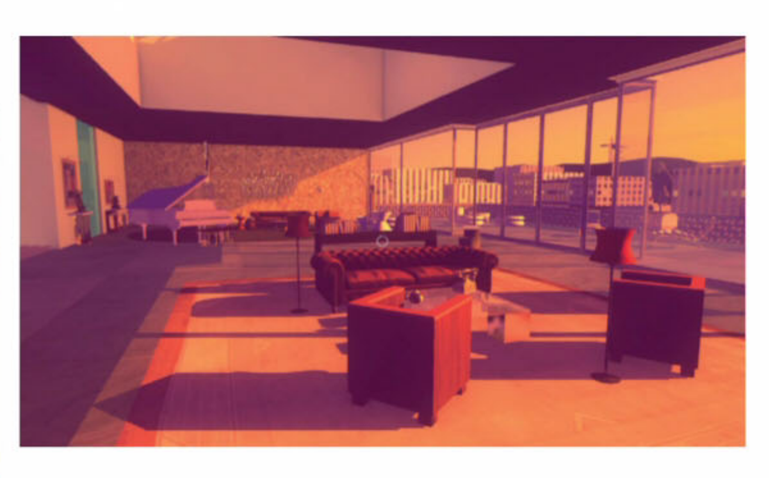
VERDICT

A FUNCTIONAL NARRATIVE THAT NEEDED A LITTLE SUBTLETY



Below: Some of the decisions you make are really quite silly. Will you polish the silverware 'tenderly' with your breath, or with cleaning products? It's a forced attempt at imparting emotion into a situation than asks for none, and this happens far too often.





YOU'RE ON FIRE? AREN'T WE ALL

Magicka 2

Magicka 2 is a game that practically terrorises you into having a sense of humour about it. Visually it's nothing less than a demented helter-skelter ride of gaudy chaos, in which accidents are clearly supposed to happen, and happen often. Trying to keep an eye on your character is one thing, trying to keep an eye on the trajectory of your spells is another, and trying to keep track of both of those things while also manoeuvring safely around your three co-op partners demands either a sixth sense or exhaustive communication.

When it isn't being optically bewildering, *Magicka 2* is bright, compelling and yes, often highly amusing. Although the campaign is just under five brisk hours long, it's qualitatively consistent and provides replay opportunities as rigorously as its wizards cast spells. Campaign run throughs don't just give you access to new gear, but discovering artefacts nets you access to all sorts of gameplay modifiers. Many of them are difficulty based – allowing you to customise the health and attack power of your team and your enemies – but others are gleefully idiotic, such as Sitcom Mode and modifiers that gift you with ludicrous speed or render your slain victims explosive.

Fans of the original game should be warned: this is very much business as usual. The elements, spells and spell combos remain unchanged, and thus the thrill of experimentation is going to be enjoyed by newcomers only. However, the frenzied nature of the combat essentially butchers your ability to experiment anyway, and the hysteria of battle is enough to coerce younger players into spamming the same old attacks in a blind panic, which turns the whole enterprise into a monotonous grind. A more thoughtful tutorial would help. In that department at least, this sequel is markedly inferior to its predecessor.

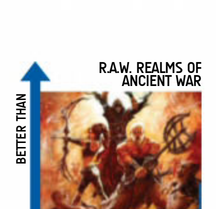
Aside from some incessant audio clipping, the game works fabulously well online, with rapid matchmaking and a straightforward party management system, which is just as well, because playing the game alone is a punishing endurance test that will only be of interest to militant obsessives. Without a trio of gallant companions, *Magicka 2* is benchmark brutal, and often brazenly unfair. And there's nothing amusing about that.

It may be the absolute antithesis of a groundbreaking sequel, but *Magicka 2* is well-made and diverting enough to maintain the original game's healthy following. Nobody is shooting for the moon here; just aiming to give the fans more of what they enjoyed.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Playstation 4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Linux
ORIGIN: Sweden
PUBLISHER: Paradox Interactive
DEVELOPER: Pieces Interactive
PRICE: £11.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN: R.A.W. REALMS OF ANCIENT WAR



WORSE THAN: DIABLO 3



Below: Challenge Mode is a straightforward, but very taut rendition of Survival / Horde. As with the campaign it's pretty painful when tackled alone, but it's a pure stripped-down lark with three friends.



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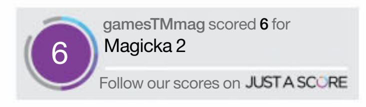
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

MINOR STATS: *Magicka* isn't an RPG series, but when juxtaposed with the flexibility and variety of the combat, the complete lack of classes and levelling is a tad mystifying.

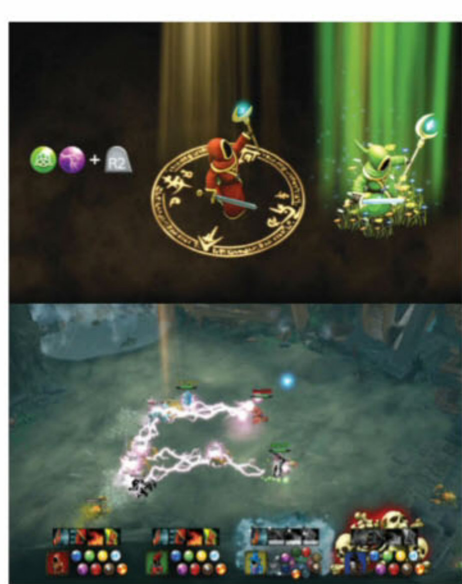
VERDICT



UNAMBITIOUS, STURDY, CHAOTIC, FUN







Above: Boss battles are an area of disappointment in *Magicka 2*, and the game's final skirmish is a colossal letdown. After lazily unleashing multiple clones of previous bosses, a confusing and pernickety new projectile system is inexplicably introduced.



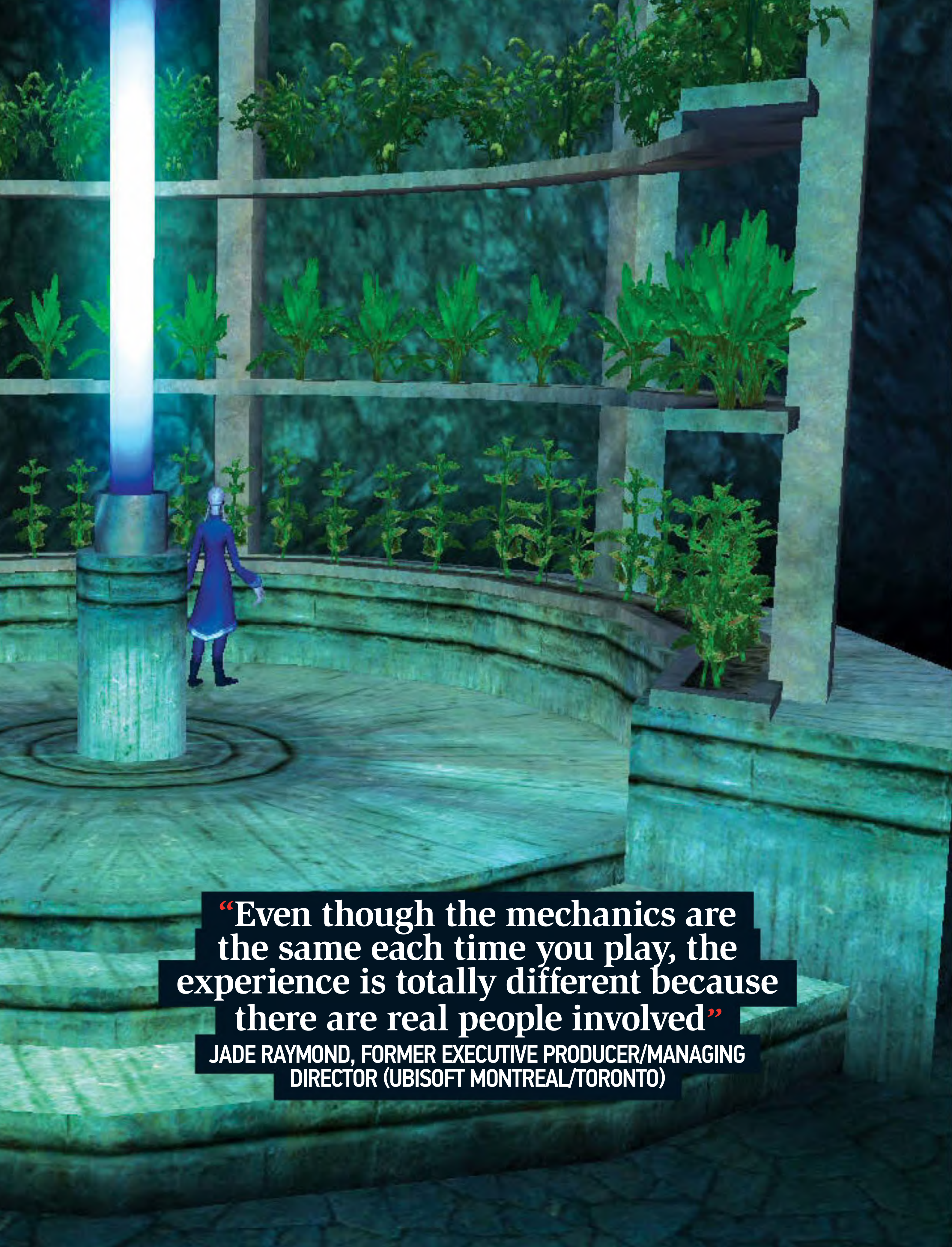
WHY I ♥...

EVERQUEST

JADE RAYMOND, FORMER EXECUTIVE PRODUCER/MANAGING DIRECTOR (UBISOFT MONTREAL/TORONTO)

I have amazing memories of EverQuest *because I was working at Sony at the time that it launched and my team had been working on some back-end server stuff and some things that had been related to Sony Station. During the release we actually had a bit of down time and so we got to play a bit at work – as well as on our own time – and it just made me really love in a game, for the first time, social dynamics and the meta-game that appears beyond the game. Even though the mechanics are the same each time you play, the experience is totally different because there are real people involved. That creates unexpected reactions and behaviour and it makes the same thing new each time.*

I had actually almost worked with Richard Garfield as an intern, and I went down to interview with him and he offered me the job of prototyping some of his game ideas. But I spent a really great day playing his game prototypes with him and discussing his game design philosophy. He has a really interesting perspective on the meta-game and the asocial meta-game and how that is much more engaging than just the game itself and probably has a long-term appeal. I'm also a huge fan of board games and loved Settlers Of Catan *for the same reason: that the rules create this dynamic of trading the cards between people.* EverQuest *was my first time experiencing that in a digital game and how powerful that was, so that had a big impact on me.*



"Even though the mechanics are the same each time you play, the experience is totally different because there are real people involved"

JADE RAYMOND, FORMER EXECUTIVE PRODUCER/MANAGING DIRECTOR (UBISOFT MONTREAL/TORONTO)

RETRO

NO.163

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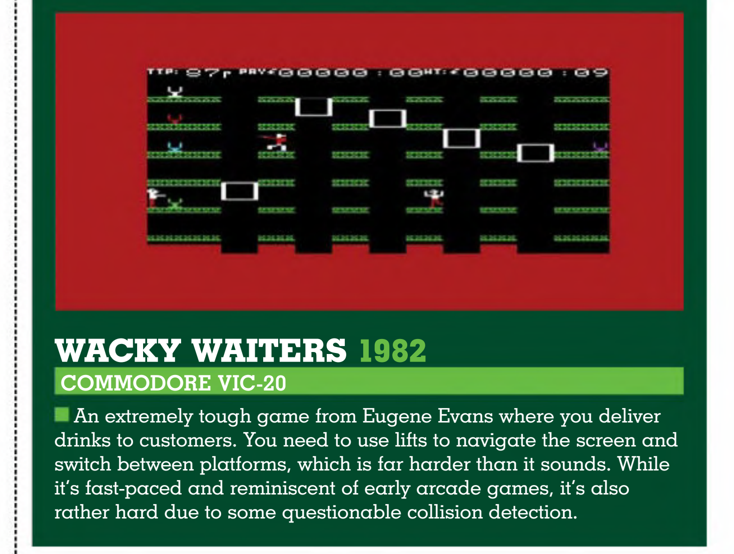
THE RETRO GUIDE TO... IMAGINE SOFTWARE

games™ looks back at every game from one of the most infamous software labels of the Eighties. How many of the following did you play?

IMAGINE SOFTWARE STILL remains one of the gaming industry's biggest cautionary tales. Set up in 1982 by Mark Butler and David Lawson, the Liverpool-based developer quickly earned a (rightful) reputation for its high-quality games and its unique, forward-thinking approach to packaging and advertising. Despite its outward appearance, all wasn't as it seemed at Imagine Software and even by December 1983 rumours were circulating that the company might be in some sort of financial trouble due to unpaid advertising bills.

Everything sadly came to a head for Imagine Software when it was chosen by BBC television director Paul Anderson to be the focus of its latest *Commercial Breaks* episode. Although there was initial reluctance, Imagine eventually agreed to participate and the documentary remains one of the only ways that you can still see footage of its legendary 'MegaGames', *Bandersnatch* and *Psyclapse*. Anderson was expecting to get a glimpse into the exciting and up-and-coming videogame industry, but instead he famously managed to film a company in tatters.

Imagine Software was unable to pay its huge debts and Ocean Software acquired the label, primarily to use it for its numerous arcade conversions. Eventually though, even Ocean tired of the branding and quietly closed the label down after the release of the dire *Victory Road*. The original Imagine Software burned briefly but brightly, but its legacy lives on due in no small part to a truly cracking collection of great early games that entertained many a VIC-20 and Spectrum owner.



WACKY WAITERS 1982

COMMODORE VIC-20

An extremely tough game from Eugene Evans where you deliver drinks to customers. You need to use lifts to navigate the screen and switch between platforms, which is far harder than it sounds. While it's fast-paced and reminiscent of early arcade games, it's also rather hard due to some questionable collision detection.





ARCADIA 1982

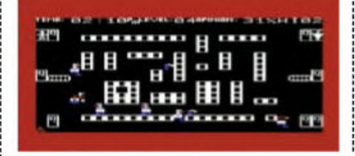
VARIOUS

Imagine's first game by co-owner Dave Lawson highlights a technical proficiency that would lead to its many arcade conversions. *Arcadia* is a tough but fair shooter with you shooting down wave upon wave of deadly aliens that diagonally descend towards you. Graphically it's a little on the basic side, but the simplistic looking sprites allow for some extremely hectic gameplay.

CATCHA SNATCHA 1982

COMMODORE VIC-20

An interesting take on the maze genre that revolves around recovering lost items in a shop. You must drop them off at specific locations, which will keep your approval level high. Let it drop to zero per cent and you'll receive one of three written warnings. The game is made more difficult by customers dropping off bombs that must be disposed of as quickly as possible.





AH DIDDUMS 1983

VARIOUS

This is another early effort from Dave Lawson and an interesting one to boot. You play a teddy bear trying to escape toy boxes by building steps with building blocks. While the concept is sound enough, it does suffer from tiny, flickery visuals and a rather steep difficulty level.

FRANTIC 1982

COMMODORE VIC-20

This is one of the early efforts from Imagine's Eugene Evans, who appeared in several news stories during the company's heyday because of his unusually young age at the time. The aim in *Frantic* is to track down enemies in your gun sights and shoot them down. It's made trickier by the erratic actions of your opponents and the fact that you only have a limited amount of fuel with which to achieve your goal. Frantic by name, frantic by nature.





BEWITCHED 1983

COMMODORE VIC-20

Here's an interesting, but infuriating take on the maze genre. You must use colour keys to open locks that will allow you to slowly navigate through the gigantic maze. You can only carry one colour key at a time, which would be fine if it wasn't for all the infuriating ghosts that haunt the maze's corridors. Oh and some doors hide dead ends which only adds to the frustration.

REMEMBERING A LEGEND

Jim Bagley pays tribute to one of Imagine's best coders

When did you start working with Jonathan Smith?
I started working with Joffa in 1988, when I started at Special FX working on *Gutz*, which was a great moment for me – to work alongside someone who had already done so many great games! He shared so many great tips with me like his push scroller tech that I used in *Gutz*, which was great.

What was Jonathan like to work with?
Although he was in reality a shy person he was always a laugh, and helpful, if you ever asked a question about anything. I had the pleasure of working alongside Joffa for about nine to ten years, and we had a lot of laughs and good times that I will cherish.

What would you consider to be Jonathan's finest Imagine game and why?
Personally I would consider *Green Beret* his finest game because it had many of his trademarks in, it had his fast push scroll, it had his multi channel music driver, and most importantly in his games it had humour, he always liked to add humour to his games, I used to love playing it after school with my mates.

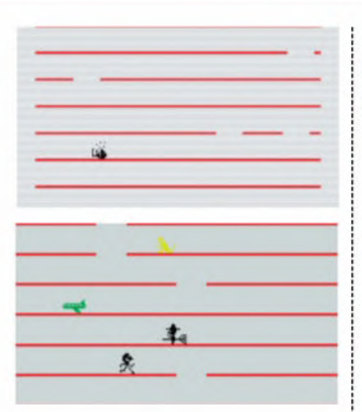
What was it exactly that made Jonathan's Imagine games so special?
Joffa was more than just a coder. He was one of the very few that were not only a great coder but a great artist as well. There are not many people who are good at both coding and art – it's usually one or the other, and only very rarely both.



JUMPING JACK 1983

VARIOUS

This is one of Imagine's ugliest games with pathetic stick men and extremely simplistic sprites. Despite this, it's actually a highly addictive game with the aim being to jump through the gaps of each platform until you reach the top of the screen. As the levels progress more and more annoying hazards appear, turning *Jumping Jack* into a highly challenging game. Fast-paced and very, very fun.





SCHIZOIDS 1983

ZX SPECTRUM

This is an interesting cross between *Asteroids* and *Thrust* and it's just as much fun. Rather than shooting objects down you must use your intergalactic dozer to dump them into the black hole in the centre of the screen. It takes a while to get used to the controls, but it ultimately becomes surprisingly addictive.

STONKERS 1983

ZX SPECTRUM

This is arguably one of the earliest real-time strategy games and was coded by John Gibson. Despite shipping with a number of bugs, its comprehensive gameplay, which saw you controlling infantry, tanks and artillery and some challenging AI ensured it became a firm favourite with Spectrum fans.



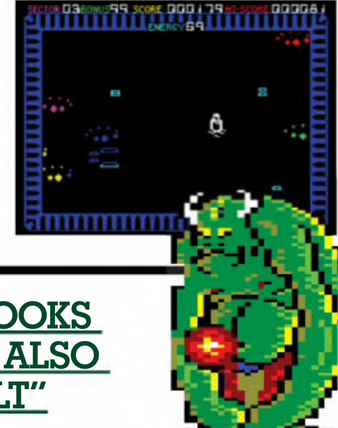


ZIP-ZAP 1983

ZX SPECTRUM

The most remarkable aspect of *Zip-Zap* is that it shamelessly rips off the main *Star Wars* theme for its title music. It's an otherwise tediously dull spin on *Jetpac* where you fight through the cramped playing area collecting keys so you can move to the next equally tedious stage and die a little inside.



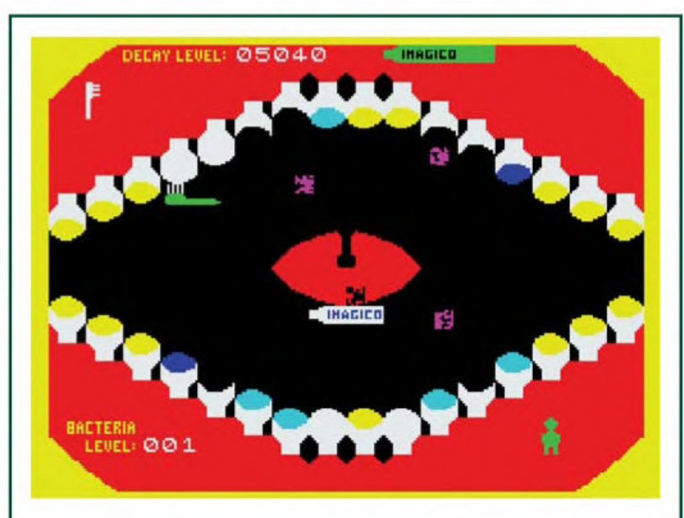


"EVERY VERSION LOOKS INCREDIBLE BUT IS ALSO INSANELY DIFFICULT"

ZZOOM 1983

ZX SPECTRUM

John Gibson made a number of hugely impressive games at Imagine, and this one is undoubtedly our favourite. You zoom around in a ship picking up humans while avoiding wave after wave of incoming enemies. The ground itself is a constant hazard too, so you need to make sure you don't fly into it. Although it can be tough, *Zzoom* is an amazing technical achievement for so early in the Spectrum's life.



MOLAR MAUL 1983

VARIOUS

As its name suggests *Molar Maul* is a battle – a battle against poor mouth hygiene. Use your trusty toothbrush to scrub away germs and bad fillings before the decay level rises too high. It's another fast and furious action game from Imagine and yet another dynamic offering from the inventive John Gibson.

ALCHEMIST 1983

ZX SPECTRUM

This early adventure game has some lovely touches including the main character's ability to turn into a majestic golden eagle. Set in an evil warlock's many-screened castle, you must constantly transform between forms to retrieve the four pieces of a deadly scroll. Huge, impressive graphics and some clever stage design make *Alchemist* an essential play.




B.C. BILL 1984

VARIOUS

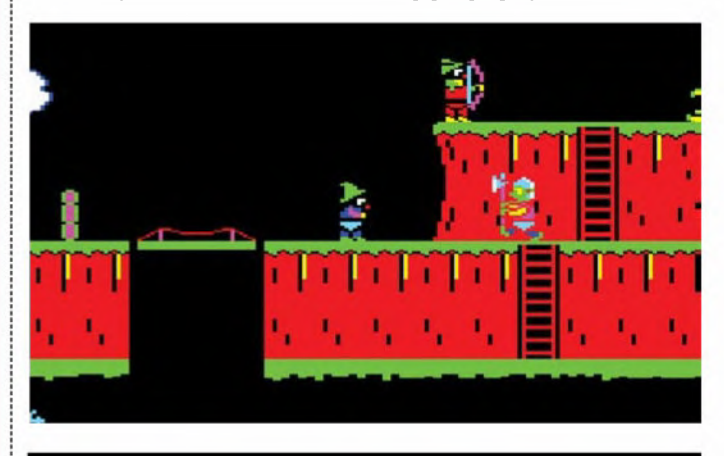
There are some interesting mechanics going on here, mainly revolving around you raising a family for 17 years without losing any of them. The best way to do this is to club as many cave women over the head as possible and throw them into your harem so they can produce lots of children for you to feed. We'd like to think this is a terribly clever satirical take on male chauvinism, but as it came out in the Eighties it probably isn't.




WIZADORE 1985

BBC MICRO

This rather engaging adventure is notable for several reasons. It's the only Imagine game to appear exclusively on the BBC Micro and it was the very first game that Chris "*Wing Commander*" Roberts coded. Heavily influenced by the titles from Ultimate Play The Game, you play a wizard who must travel the gorgeous looking environments in search of scrolls that can be used to attack enemies. While it's difficult, the solid level design and excellent visuals will keep you playing.



PEDRO 1984

VARIOUS

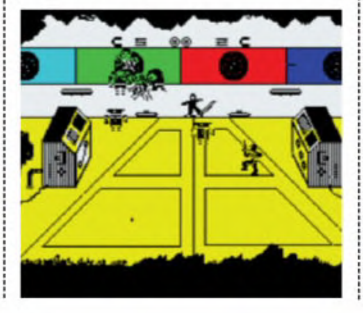


Pedro is a frantic-paced action game where you must protect Pedro's garden from a string of pests by blocking entrances, replanting any plants they eat and simply stamping on them. You also need to keep a wary eye out for a seed-stealing tramp who appears from time to time. It's as fun to play as it is surreal.

COSMIC CRUISER 1984

VARIOUS

Interesting shooter played over two playing areas. One sees you using a canon to shoot down portals, while the other has you entering said portals as a spaceman trying to rescue any imprisoned friends. It's a clever little game that's let down by some clunky controls.



HYPER SPORTS 1985

VARIOUS

One of Imagine's earliest arcade conversions is also one of its very best. It not only has virtually all the events from the arcade game (only pole vault is missing) but also captures all its quirky charm, making it an essential play. Jonathan Smith's coding is incredible, offering gamers an authentic arcade-like experience.





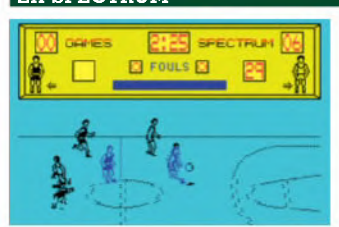
WORLD SERIES BASEBALL 1985

VARIOUS

The stick men might be crude, but this is actually a pretty authentic rendition of America's most baffling sport. There are not many game modes, but the AI is challenging enough while it obviously comes alive when playing with a friend. We particularly like the big screen that shows off pitches and strikes.

WORLD SERIES BASKETBALL 1985

ZX SPECTRUM



Like *World Series Baseball*, this fine effort is also by Platinum Productions. The action is a little sluggish nowadays, but this is a fun early version of basketball that caters for multiple players and has most of the rules from the sport. You can even change the court colour to make sprites easier to see.



"IF WE HAD TO PICK A FAVOURITE IT WOULD BE THE AMSTRAD VERSION"



YIE AR KUNG-FU 1985

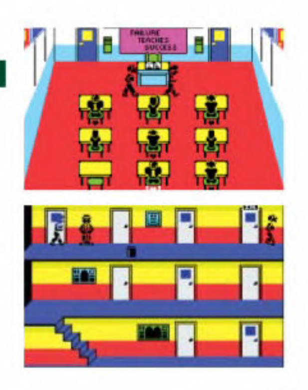
VARIOUS

This superb adaptation of Konami's innovative one-on-one fighter is one of those rare releases with mainly great conversions across the board. The AI throughout is extremely challenging and fair, while Imagine did an excellent job of capturing the combat system of the arcade original. If we had to pick a favourite it would be the Amstrad version, but they're all great.

MIKIE 1985

VARIOUS

Pretty much all of the conversions of Konami's 1984 multi-screened arcade game are fantastic fun, but it's the fine Spectrum conversion from the late Jonathan Smith that remains our absolute favourite to this day. It's a complete package, boasting excellent controls, including every single one of the arcade game's stages and even having a cheeky rendition of The Beatle's *A Hard Day's Night* for its title tune.



BRUCE EVERISS INTERVIEW

One of Imagine's key staff looks back



Why did the company gain acclaim so quickly?

In 1982 most videogame companies were run from home on kitchen tables. Imagine was among the first to be a properly run, properly staffed full time organisation. We also marketed very aggressively and in *Arcadia* we had a fantastic first product.

Who came up with its marketing campaigns?

Microdigital in Liverpool was one of the first computer stores, opening in mid 1978. I ran it and did all the marketing, so got to know all the press and what worked and didn't. This hard-earned expertise was transferred to Imagine.

When did you realise it was all starting to go wrong?

During the last quarter of 1983 sales were rocketing. In December we had sales of just under a million pounds for one month, which was phenomenal in those days. Then in the first quarter of 1984 sales just disappeared, as you can hear Sylvia explaining in the *Commercial Breaks* video. Then one day WHSmith sent back a truckload of our games and refused to pay for them, saying they had been returned as faulty. We tested them and they were perfect. Customers had just returned them after copying them. We tried many different tactics to try and reduce the copying, which is where the MegaGames came from. From a business point of view the MegaGames were just an anti-piracy solution.

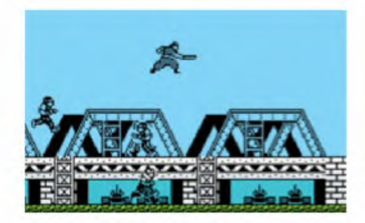
What was the reason for Imagine's downfall?

The principle reason was tape-to-tape copying – this just suddenly became the zeitgeist and so there was very little money left in the market to pay the wages of the people who made the games. Imagine was expensive to run with large city centre offices and two lots of prior offices to be paid for, plus a bloated development workforce. Also the flow of games just wasn't sufficient and the quality of those games started to lag behind what people like Ultimate and US Gold were doing.

GREEN BERET 1986

VARIOUS

Jonathan Smith created our favourite version (the Spectrum in case you're wondering) but all of Imagine's conversions are decent. It's arguably as hard as the arcade original, with your titular hero running through the stages stabbing as many guys as possible. Pressing up to jump gets annoying, but it's the only real criticism we have.







KONAMI'S GOLF 1986

VARIOUS

There aren't many shots to choose from in this game of golf, but that's to be expected from an arcade conversion. The course design is decent, there's some nice animation on the golfer, while all the conversions are of a good standard. Like *Ping Pong* it's ultimately boosted by a strong two-player mode.

SUPER SOCCER 1986

VARIOUS

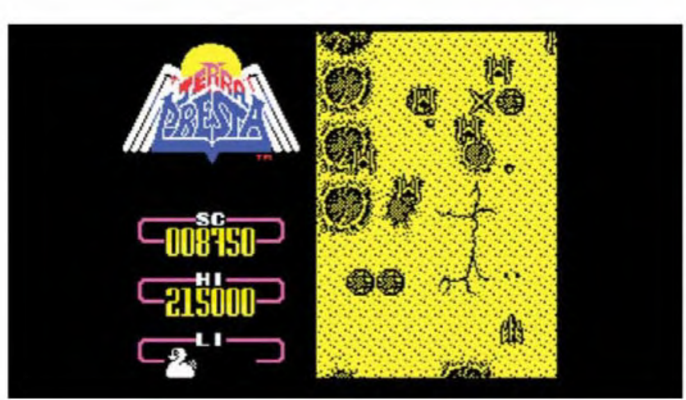
There's nothing beautiful about this interpretation of the popular game. The graphics are pretty dire with ugly looking sprites and slow scrolling. The controls are very sluggish, while the gameplay is extremely simplistic, it's buggy too, with the company receiving many returns from unsatisfied customers. Stick with Imagine's arcade-based sports games.



TERRA CRESTA 1986

VARIOUS

Jonathan Smith delivers another cracking Spectrum port, this time for Nichibutsu's obscure shooter. Starting off as a small craft you must shoot down pods to slowly increase the size and firepower of your ship. The graphics are rather basic but the gameplay is top notch and extremely addictive. Sadly, Imagine's C64 port is less impressive.



YIE AR KUNG-FU 2 1986

VARIOUS

Unlike the arcade original, Konami's sequel started off life on the MSX. It's a pretty dull scrolling fighter and the same can be said for Imagine's various home conversions. They all look nice enough, but suffer from poor controls and some questionable collision detection. They're all as tough as old boots too and not very fun to play.





KONAMI'S TENNIS 1986

VARIOUS

Despite doing a decent port of *Konami's Golf*, Choice Software's tennis game is disappointing. While the graphics are decent, it suffers from iffy controls and incredibly basic gameplay. There's very little depth on offer here, meaning you should stick with Imagine's far more enjoyable *Ping Pong* conversion.





MOVIE 1986

VARIOUS

Excellent isometric adventure where you play a gumshoe called Jack Marlow who must retrieve an audiotape from a dangerous mob boss. While the visuals are truly impressive, it's the clever icon-driven gameplay and stylistic speech bubbles (allowing you to type into them from the keyboard) that help make it so memorable.



PING PONG 1986

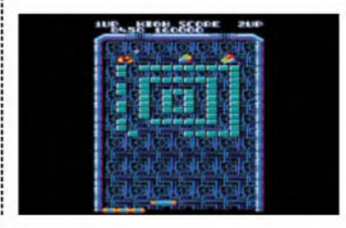
VARIOUS

We lost hours to this arcade conversion, again coded by Jonathan Smith. Although there are few moves to learn, it's surprisingly deep, helped by some challenging, but fair AI. The highlight however is the truly excellent two-player mode.

ARKANOID 1987

VARIOUS

Taito's take on *Breakout* receives excellent home ports from Imagine. While not every home system could replicate the arcade's spinner, the game is otherwise arcade perfect, with great visuals and all the power-ups and levels of the original.



ARMY MOVES 1987

VARIOUS



This was one of several Dinamic Software games published under the Imagine label. Split into two parts (a *Silk Worm*-styled blaster and a standard run-and-gun) it certainly looks the business thanks to some astonishing looking visuals. Sadly, it's too hard for its own good, with infuriating bottle necks and unfair level design. It does look amazing, though. Did we mention that?

ATHENA 1987

VARIOUS

This cutesy arcade platformer isn't too well known, but that didn't stop Imagine. Its numerous home ports are all of a high standard, capturing the fast pace of the arcade original and its stylistic visuals. Like *Game Over*, it's mainly remembered for its box art, depicting a buxom lady.



GAME OVER 1987

VARIOUS

More sadistic gaming from Dinamic Software. Every home version of *Game Over* looks incredible, but every version also features insanely difficult stages, overwhelmingly tough enemies and unfair level design that causes you to weep like a child. It's famous nowadays for its risqué cover art, which featured a barely-covered large-breasted woman.





FREDDY HARDEST 1987

VARIOUS

Freddy Hardest is another Imagine-published Dinamic Software game. And it's exactly like the others, meaning it looks as heavenly as an angel spliced with a Power Puff Girl, but is as unforgiving as Clint Eastwood's final rampage in, well, *Unforgiven*. It's two games in one as well, being half run-and-gun and half adventure romp.





RENEGADE 1987

VARIOUS

While the C64 port is pretty bland, the Amstrad and Spectrum conversions of Technos' classic arcade fighter are brilliant. The Spectrum one looks great, with stylistic cartoony visuals, but the gritty Amstrad outing is even better. It even mimics the three-button control system of the arcade original, making for a truly authentic experience.



"A TWO-PLAYER OPTION HELPS MAKE IT THE BEST SCROLLING FIGHTER ON THE SYSTEMS"

SLAP FIGHT 1987

VARIOUS

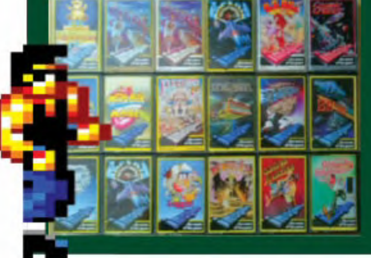
Taito's innovative arcade shooter received a string of competent ports. While the devs should be commended for recreating the original vertical screen, it comes at the sacrifice of a cramped playing area. The shooting feels nice and solid, but the collision detection feels suspect at times. Enjoyable enough but not one of Imagine's best.



THE COLLECTOR

Mark R Jones on collecting Imagine games





Why collect Imagine's games?

You couldn't possibly have an expansive collection of Spectrum games without having any by Imagine. The titles released by the Liverpool Imagine are noteworthy because they were among the first games to have really great looking artwork. And the later Imagine games I collect because I was working at Ocean when the majority were released. I have had some work published on that label so it's inevitable I should own some titles.

What did you like about Imagine's early games?

The artwork looked great, and most still do. *Alchemist* was the one I played most back when it was new but I think *Jumping Jack* is the best of their games. It might look really simple, but It has that 'one more go' thing.

What impact did the *Commercial Breaks* documentary have on you?

I remember catching the original broadcast by accident. It was the first time I'd seen anything about games on the telly. I'd seen 'Micro Live' and things with Fred Harris in previously but they showed us stuff we never used at home. To see Imagine and Ocean on the TV and learn a bit about how these games were made was fascinating to my 14-year-old self. Little did I know that in three years I'd be walking around those very corridors shown on telly downstairs at 6 Central Street. I could never have 'Imagined' it! Ha!



SALAMANDER 1987

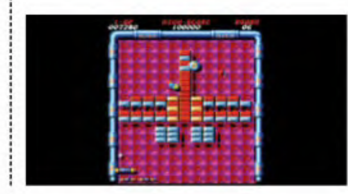
VARIOUS

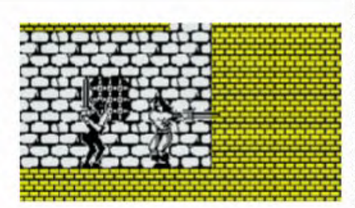
While the C64 conversion is a stunning replication of the Konami shooter, the Amstrad and Speccy outings are less impressive. In fact, the Spectrum version is absolutely nothing like the early screenshots that were promised in one prominent magazine of the time, being unrealistic and impossible mock ups.

ARKANOID: REVENGE OF DOH 1988

VARIOUS

Taito's sequel receives another cracking port by Imagine. It's not a patch on Elite's wonderful *Batty*, but this is still a cracking take on the *Breakout* formulae thanks to some clever level design, an exotic range of power-ups and highly addictive gameplay. The 16-bit versions use mouse support for added control brilliance.





RASTAN 1988

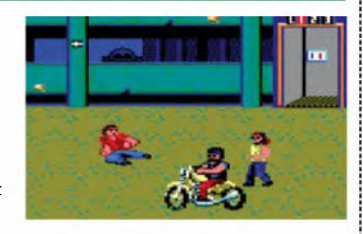
VARIOUS

Taito's popular scrolling hack-and-slash received a number of slick home conversions by numerous developers. Imagine handled the C64, Speccy and Amstrad offerings and while the Speccy and Amstrad versions impress, the C64 outing has ugly visuals and is extremely buggy to play. Special mention must go to Bob Wakelin's stunning cover art.

TARGET: RENEGADE 1988

VARIOUS

Imagine's sequel to *Renegade* is superb. The Amstrad and Spectrum versions are best due to their excellent visuals, weapon variety and a two-player option, making it the best scrolling fighter on the systems. The C64 and NES versions have superior visuals, but they're let down by being solo experiences.



THE VINDICATOR 1988

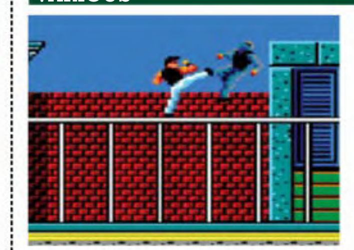
VARIOUS



Also known as *Green Beret 2*, this is an interesting, if flawed action game. Like many of Ocean's film licences, it's split into several different sections that riff on the shoot-em-up and run-and gun genres. Sadly, the first section is the worst: a painfully dull trek through a bland maze as you attempt to defuse a number of bombs.

DRAGON NINJA 1988

VARIOUS

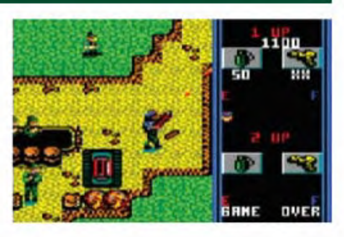


While the 8-bit versions of this scrolling fighter are competent, it's the excellent Atari ST and Amiga offerings that really capture the spirit of the arcade game. They look fantastic, cater for two players and feature all the stages from the arcade game. The only let down is an awkward control system that makes jumping a nightmare.

GUERRILLA WAR 1988

VARIOUS

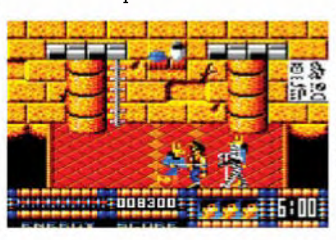
SNK's run-and-gun about the adventures of Che Cuevara and Fidel Castro was a poor arcade game, but the ports are even worse. Every version is terrible, with the C64 outing being particularly bad. Ropey collision detection, sluggish movement and ugly visuals make this one of Imagine's weakest ports.



RENEGADE III 1989

VARIOUS

Imagine's last *Renegade* game is best forgotten as it's terrible. While the time-travelling theme allows for some interesting level design (punching dinosaurs is fun) it's let down by ropey collision detection, atrocious AI and a set of amazingly bland combat moves. A truly dire game that's so weak it's incredible to think it's from the same developer.





VICTORY ROAD 1989

VARIOUS

This sequel to *Ikari Warriors* was never well regarded in arcades, so it's no surprise to learn that the home ports are equally forgettable. Amazingly, the 16-bit offerings are ropier than the 8-bit outings, with hideous visuals and terribly clunky controls that do an awful job of capturing the rotary system used in the arcade game.

AND THE REST…

- GALIVAN: COSMO POLICE (1986) VARIOUS
- FERNANDO MARTIN BASKET MASTER (1987) VARIOUS
- LEGEND OF KAGE (1987) VARIOUS
- MAG MAX (1987) VARIOUS
- PSYCHO SOLDIER (1987) VARIOUS
- TYPHOON (1988) VARIOUS
- WEC LE MANS (1988) VARIOUS
- COMIC BAKERY (1988) COMMODORE 64
- PLAY FOR YOUR LIFE (1988) ZX SPECTRUM
- JACKAL (1989) COMMODORE 64



BEHIND THE SCENES

DUNGEON SIEGE

Nowadays you can't swing a +3 long sword of discombobulation without hitting an action RPG. Representing part of a crucial middle step between the RPGs of old (or should that be olde) and the energetic extravaganzas of today, **games™** discovers the origins of this first story of Ehb…









Released: 2002
Format: PC and Mac
Developer: Gas Powered Games
Publisher: Microsoft
Key Staff: Chris Taylor (designer), Neil Hallford (designer, plot, character development), Jacob McMahon (producer and designer), Bartosz Kijanka (technical lead), Mark Peasley, Steve Thompson (art directors)

BY THE LATE NINETIES, PC RPGs, despite remaining popular, had not broken into the console market, with game pads often in particular considered inadequate for the complex controls required. Gamers were changing, however; the visceral, instant thrills of PlayStation 2 and Xbox software were infecting the PC world. Naturally, there would still be plenty of scope for complex simulations and in-depth strategy titles; but it was clear there was room for something else. Something less intense. Something more exciting. Something instantly accessible, that didn't require the assimilation of a complex set of rules just to avoid getting decapitated by the first wandering monster you bumped into.

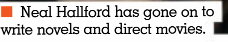
In 1997, Cavedog Entertainment released *Total Annihilation*, an RTS game that swiftly became a hit among critics and fans. Designed by Chris Taylor [see **games™** 132], *Total Annihilation* shrugged off its '*Command & Conquer* clone' tag, presenting a significantly upgraded approach to the genre. However, with Cavedog understandably keen to maximise its profits from the game, Taylor decided to do what he had already considered prior to joining the developer, and form his own studio: Gas Powered Games. "We wanted to try our hand at something different," he begins, "And although this logic is probably confounding today, as developers often stick to a single genre, back then it wasn't a strange thing to do." After finishing *Total Annihilation*, Taylor had already begun brainstorming his next project with the idea to do something 'really fun and interesting'. As early as April 1998 ideas for games were being discussed with friends at his house; by May, Gas Powered Games had been formed and a few months later, offices were acquired. Given Taylor had just started this new company, *Dungeon Siege*'s team unsurprisingly began small. "But by the end we had well over 40 people," he says, "although the average was probably closer to 30 throughout development." Many of the team had worked with Taylor on *Total Annihilation*, including Jeremy Soule, the man responsible for its outstanding and imperious score.

In terms of influences, there are several for *Dungeon Siege*. Even its creator would admit it's not the most original game in the world. But Taylor cites one in particular. "I would name *Diablo* as the single biggest influence. I loved that game but I found it had so many quirks, especially the long loading times. So I wanted to make something that would fully-immerse the player into the world." Taylor admits that many other RPGs of the time such as *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance* and the latter *Ultima* games all entered into the mix. Neal Hallford, who worked with Cavedog on the aborted fantasy adventure *Elysium*, got to know Chris Taylor as his office was adjacent to *Elysium* designer John Cutter's. "I seem to recall helping brush up a description of *Total Annihilation* for the marketing department," recalls Hallford, "But that game was all Chris really. I then heard about *Dungeon Siege* when he started Gas Powered Games and he asked me if I might be willing to help with the story." Hallford concurs with Taylor and names *Diablo* as the single biggest influence on *Dungeon Siege*. "*Diablo* definitely had the greatest bearing. He wanted a game that concentrated on action and about having an experience that you could just pick up and play without spending 20 hours researching character classes, which was something *Diablo* really streamlined."

I WOULD NAME DIABLO AS THE SINGLE BIGGEST INFLUENCE






Neal Hallford has gone on to write novels and direct movies.


Chris Taylor served as an advisor to Obsidian Entertainment's 2011 sequel *Dungeon Siege III*.

DUNGEON SIEGE FACT FILE

Do you want to know more?

■ *Dungeon Siege* utilised its own development language called Scrit. Explains Taylor, "Back then, LUA hadn't caught on like today, so we ended up developing our own internal scripting language. Looking back now it was very ambitious, but at the time it just seemed like the best way to make the game."

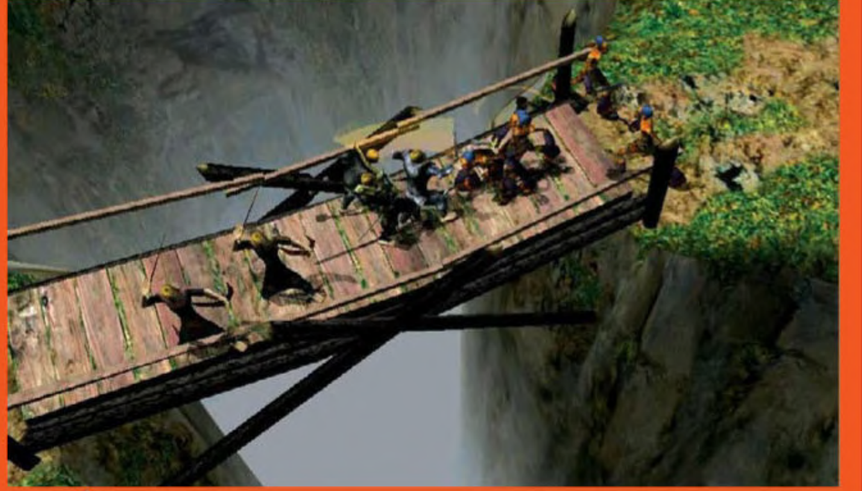
■ The team considered multiplayer as very much part of the game and created its own world, the Utrean Peninsula, just for this very purpose.

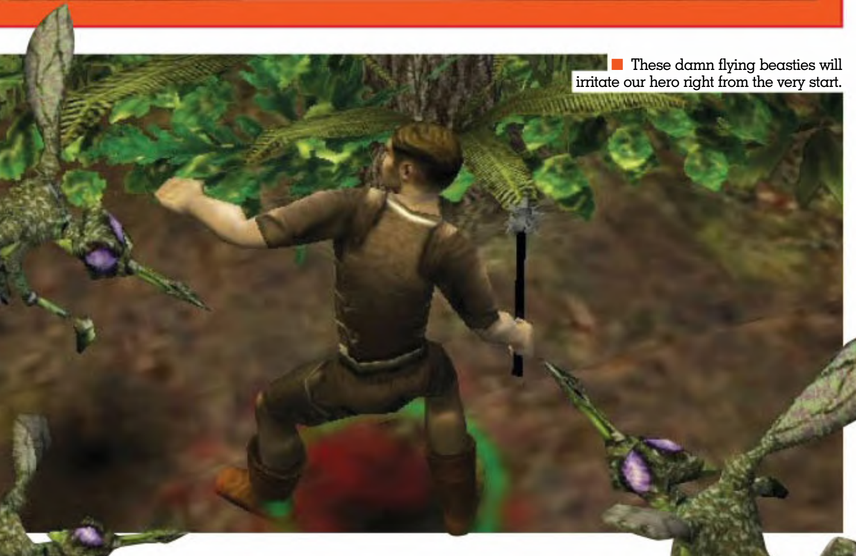
■ Some fans have used *Dungeon Siege*'s open engine to re-create unofficial versions of earlier games from the *Ultima* series, which was actually one of the game's main influences.

■ Composer Jeremy Soule had already forged an impressive career scoring RPGs prior to *Dungeon Siege*, having worked on *Secret Of Evermore* (1995), *Icewind Dale* (2000) and *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance* (2001).

■ One criticism of *Dungeon Siege* was that the game became a little repetitive by the final third. "I'd agree," admits Taylor. "This was a result of us stretching the content over too many hours. We should have shortened the game and made the content richer and more interesting."

■ In 2003, Gas Powered Games released a standalone expansion pack called *Legends Of Aranna*, which generously included the original game.





■ These damn flying beasties will irritate our hero right from the very start.

Dungeon Siege took this further, allowing the player to simply select a character type before jumping into the game and developing their class as they progressed. "I think it was a very revolutionary idea, for the time," confirms Hallford, "but then *Dungeon Siege* was one of the most unusual gigs I've ever worked on." Normally the experienced designer would work with a blank canvas for his world and a license to create whatever he wanted. "With *Dungeon Siege*, however, Chris contacted me once the project was already well under way, and he by then had a few stakes set in the ground." Taylor had already created much of the Kingdom of Ehb, where the action would take place, and the enemies, the Seck. "He also knew where it was going to start and end," continues Hallford, "but beyond that he just had a sequence of events with monsters and items. What he didn't have, was a why." These questions included why were these bad things happening, and who were the Seck?

Dungeon Siege had a technical basis and a skeleton of a story, but no meat and bones. "So I sat down and threaded the levels together," says Hallford, "with a story that made sense, creating dialogues, backgrounds and backed it all up with a huge world bible that provided all the rationales for how the world was." In some ways, Hallford's imagination ran a little over, creating more backstory than the player would ever be able to digest. But it all added depth to the game, and gave players a richer experience. "All the hard work and heavy lifting was Neal," says Taylor. "I had some specific ideas about the origin of the story and world – Neal worked with these ideas and developed the entire fictional universe from that. It was fun for me to come up with names and places and then watch him masterfully weave those into the fiction."

■■■ On the technical side, *Dungeon Siege* would use its own bespoke engine. "It was different back then," says Taylor, "as most developers would create their own engine. Even though we might have been able to modify a first-person shooter engine, we were fairly certain that we couldn't do the things we wanted to do with the continuously streaming world if we didn't develop our own engine." The continuous streaming that Taylor mentions remains something of a novelty even today, and proved to be the biggest single stumbling block in *Dungeon Siege*'s development. "It was node-based technology – meaning that the entire world was built out of

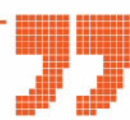
■ The Kingdom of Ehb has an impressive amount of varied terrain.





It's very linear, there's no waving from the course or direction of the game and there's way more action than story, but it's still good entertainment and will be loved by many for this fact.

IGN. 2002





There are plenty of spectacular spells.

building blocks that would all fit together," explains Taylor. The effect was a complete lack of loading screens and transitions as the player explored Ehb – walls of buildings and caves would simply melt away when the player entered them, creating a seamless playing experience, unseen at the time. "We ran into all kinds of crazy problems with it… But in the end we got it all sorted out and it worked beautifully. And even better, we created these impossible worlds to allow the player to teleport from one place to another, because you could attach and sort-of loop these nodes together. It was like we created five dimensional space."

Hallford recalls, "One of the things I loved and respected about Chris is that he's a hard-core techhead. He's always about advancing the technology under the hood as well as making a game that's fun to play. *Dungeon Siege* was no exception, and the first time he showed me the game with no level loads, my jaw hit the floor; it was absolutely incredible, one big, beautiful, seamless experience." Another ground-breaking implementation was the extreme zoom in (and above) option that permitted the player to really feel they were stepping into the action. "I'm a big fan of that, and this was essential for not only allowing the player to zoom in and see the detail, but also zoom out to survey the battle when multiple characters were slugging it out." notes Taylor. However, given the concept and style of play, a larger party of directly player-controlled characters was soon abandoned. "As much as I am influenced by other games, I take pride in doing it differently. We always took a look at competitor's games and asked ourselves what we like about them, but in the end we wanted to create our own experience."

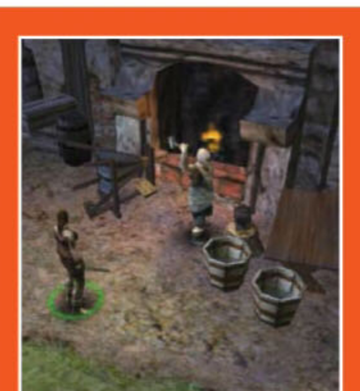
■■■ *Dungeon Siege* was intended, from the start, to take the RPG formula and distil it into a pure adrenalin action fest. Taylor says, "I wanted more action and automation of the boring parts. It's arguable that I took this too far, but that was our focus all along," and Hallford endorses this. "Chris's argument was that gamers don't generally read what they're shown and he wanted it to be quick-quick-quick. It's then a matter of matching the narrative style to the play style, and I think for *Dungeon Siege* it was the right move." For the background story, Hallford drew from the dark and gritty world that Taylor and his colleagues had begun to create. "So for inspiration I turned to the master of gritty, military fantasy, Glen Cook," he explains. "There's a lot of Cook's feel in *Dungeon Siege*, especially if you get down to the substrata of the world history I created." Hallford also drew on the legends of the Romans stranded in Britain after the retreat of their empire. "It's a theme that comes up in a lot of my work, the idea of a civilisation that gets left behind, and that's the same with the Kingdom of Ehb. It's the leftover from the recession of a great empire known as the Kingdom of the Stars."

WE WORKED ALMOST EVERY SINGLE DAY FOR THE ENTIRE DEVELOPMENT AND OFTEN 12-14 HOURS A DAY AT THAT

The small size of Gas Powered Games proved to be a double-edge sword. "We absolutely benefitted from being able to make decisions quicker," recalls Taylor. "But the flip side was that we overstretched ourselves in every way. The engine, the size of the world, the huge amount of content. We worked almost every single day for the entire development and often

COOKING UP A GOOD STORY

From The US Navy To the Kingdom of Ehb



■ **DUNGEON SIEGE TAKES** place in the kingdom of Ehb, an independent state created after the collapse of the Empire of Stars. Playing a humble farmer who, like many of Ehb's inhabitants, suddenly finds their life turned upside down by an invasion of evil goblin-like creatures known as the Krug, your first task is to reach the town of Stonebridge to seek help for your village. Far from being the end, however, this is just the beginning of a dangerous and lengthy journey for the main character.

A large percentage of *Dungeon Siege*'s plot and characters comes from a favourite author of Neal Hallford's, Glen Cook. Cook served several years in the US Navy before becoming a writer in the Nineteen-Seventies and his fantasy work generally carries a realistic and gritty tone, influenced by his time serving in the forces. In terms of *Dungeon Siege*, the biggest influence is easily Cook's *Dread Empire* series, which details the ups and downs of the eponymous regime.

For further reading, the *Chronicles Of The Black Company* are recommended along with the slightly-lighter-in-tone *PI Garrett* series of novels.





It's a fast-paced hack-and-slash game, so if you're looking for a deeper role-playing game or one in which the primary goal isn't to liberate excessive quantities of loot from its owners, then *Dungeon Siege* isn't really for you.

GameSpot, 2002

UWE BOLL'S FINEST

Damned with faint praise



MENTION THE NAME Uwe Boll to most film fans/gamers and you're likely to be greeted with howls of derision or looks of horror. 2008's clumsily-titled *In The Name Of The King: A Dungeon Siege Tale* may have had a slightly above-par cast for a Boll movie in that you might actually have heard of the actors (Jason Statham, Claire Forlani, Burt Reynolds, John Rhys-Davies and, err, Matthew Lillard) but there was no disguising this turd of the highest order. The critics uniformly issued a savaging, and the movie plummeted out of existence as far as the box-office was concerned. Todd Gilchrist, reviewing the movie for IGN, delivered a particularly backhanded compliment, calling it the German director's 'best film to date'. A four per cent score on Rotten Tomatoes and 3.8 average score on IMDB would suggest this was a generous assessment. Watch it, if you dare.

12-14 hours a day at that. Looking back, it was totally insane." Part of the team's ambition was the massive amount of content they were attempting to cram into *Dungeon Siege*. Taylor continues, "We had to develop a way to automatically test all this content because there was no way we would ever have enough testers available to us. These would run for days, sending scripted characters through the world, hacking and slashing everything they could find. It was actually hilarious to watch the screen as these robots ran at high speed, emulating the player." Amusement aside, the testing and issues with the engine would be the main reason why *Dungeon Siege* took so long to deliver. "It was a little more than four years in development," says Taylor painfully.

Surprisingly, despite the long working hours and the close proximity of the team, people issues, while a natural part of the process, were no better or worse on *Dungeon Siege*. This was due in no small part to Taylor's trust in the people he employed, as Hallford recalls. "I have to say Chris left me pretty much alone to do my thing after having told me up front what he wanted. He trusted me and that's a real rarity in the industry. Unsurprisingly, the games I've been most acclaimed for are the ones where the bosses got out of my way and let me do what I'm best at. Chris understood that." Another example of this trust was with *Dungeon Siege*'s evocative music from composer Jeremy Soule.

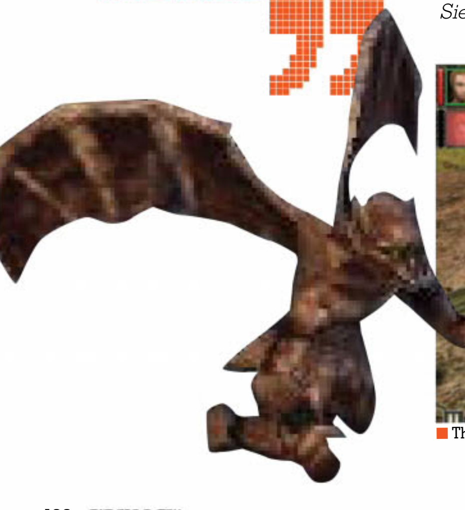
There was no shortage of gore in *Dungeon Siege*.

"My trust with Jeremy was pretty high after we had such a great time working on *Total Annihilation*," smiles Taylor, "And I knew he knew what he was doing. When I first heard the music I was thrilled."

Chris Taylor and his team were pleased with their results, but as always with game development, there were things that didn't quite go to plan. "We were never completely satisfied with the AI," he muses. "As it was always a lot dumber than I wanted it to be." Given the fast pace that Taylor always had in mind for *Dungeon Siege*, this was a key element. "We were very mindful of making the AI too smart, because then the game plays very differently, has a slower pace and appeals to a different audience." Traditional RPGs such as *Baldur's Gate* often relied upon drawing out enemies, or taking them out one-by-one, a tactic that, like Taylor says, slows down the pace of the game. But the one omission he truly regrets is the absence of general purpose teleporters: "We just couldn't find a way to create them. We had our cool fixed portals, but couldn't drop those dynamically into the world. It bugged me a lot, and I think the game suffered because of it." Certainly anyone who has spent a length of time trooping around Ehb, may agree. "We just ran out of time." says Taylor, sadly.

I DIDN'T EXPECT SUCH A POSITIVE REACTION AND MOST PUBLISHERS LIKED THE IDEA

Of course, by now the Gas Powered Games chief had already secured a publisher in fledgling PC games producer Microsoft. "It was weird as I didn't expect such a positive reaction and most publishers liked the idea and wanted to publish the game," he says modestly. "But in the end I chose Microsoft because Ed Fries personally reached out to me and told me how excited they were to expand into the PC games business." Strangely, considering the role Microsoft had to play in *Dungeon Siege*, an Xbox



> A GAMING EVOLUTION Diablo > Dungeon Siege > Mass Effect 2

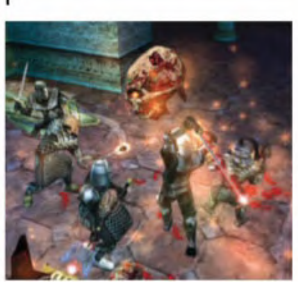


Diablo set the engaging hack-and-slash mould which *Dungeon Siege* transformed technically and visually.

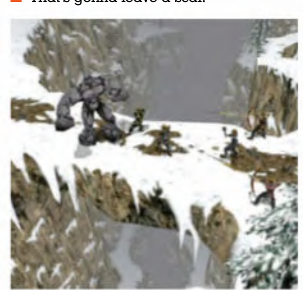


Mass Effect 2 was a more streamlined action RPG, that takes *Dungeon Siege*'s in-depth world to a sci-fi setting.





That's gonna leave a scar.



version never saw the light of day. "I do recall a discussion on it but it never went far," says Taylor. "I think the game was just too huge for consoles back then. And today it's different, but back then there was doubt about the audience as well." Upon release, *Dungeon Siege* was a decent hit although as Taylor knowingly concedes, "Games back then needed to sell much more than million copies to make it an interesting business. We only barely crossed the interesting line."

Designer Neal Hallford had plenty of confidence prior to release. "Between all the technical innovations, mechanics and amazing graphics, it was just a hell of a lot of fun to play. And also, because it opened up the toolset, it kept the player base very invested in expanding and extending the life of the product." Like *Total Annihilation* before it, Taylor insisted on ensuring a modification community would build up around *Dungeon Siege* like it had his hit RTS game. "I've always been a huge supporter of the modding community, and we spent a fortune in development to get those tools and the documentation created."

Ultimately, given the ambition of the project and how different it was to be running his own studio, Taylor concedes he learned much from the development of *Dungeon Siege*. "I have mostly good memories, and yes, I learned a lot. Some of it was about software development and some of it was on managing teams and working with a publisher. I also learned a lot about tax planning, banking and legal, more than I ever would as a pure game developer." After the success of *Total Annihilation*, Taylor's decision to leave and set up a new company may have seemed foolhardy, yet it paid off. "My advice is, if you are thinking about starting your own company to design your ultimate game, then do it!" he grins, although not without a caveat. "But before you do, work inside a company for ten years or so to learn as much as you can first. I wouldn't have survived without the knowledge I learned at Electronic Arts and Humongous Entertainment or Cavedog." For Hallford, the importance of *Dungeon Siege* can never be overstated given the way it pushed technological boundaries and set new standards for what people could expect from an RPG experience. "It really was a game-changer in terms of all the things it achieved technically and mechanically and was the first game I worked on that sold more than a million copies. I still have the golden plaque that I received from Gas Powered Games hanging in my office. I'm really proud to have had my part in making it happen."

Healing ruins offered convenient rest stops.

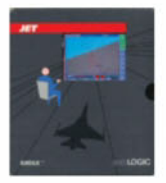


INTERVIEW

MIKE KULAS

We speak to the man who helped create smash hits like Descent, Freespace and Red Faction before founding his own company, Volition, makers of Saints Row

SELECT GAMEOGRAPHY



Jet (1988)
Program Developer



Descent (1994)
Concept and Programmer



Red Faction (2001)
Executive Producer

What was your first experience of videogames and computers?
The Magnavox Odyssey. Even though it was primitive, I got the same giddy feeling from playing it that I would several times later as technology improved and provided a new experience each time. The first computer I owned was a TRS-80. I wanted to write games for it and realised I needed to learn assembly language, but with a cassette drive as the only means of storage, it was very tedious. I bought an Apple II around 1981 with a floppy drive and that's when I learned to program. I was one of those people who thought the main purpose of a computer was to play games, so every one I used, the main thing I wanted to do was write games for it.

What was your first role in the industry?
I dropped out of college and applied at a company called Sublogic, working on a game called *Police Chase Despatcher*. But I felt guilty dropping out of school so went back and finished my degree, writing games on the side. After college, I worked in educational software for a while before returning to Sublogic.

During your second spell at Sublogic you worked mainly on flight simulations and met Matt Toschlog…
I liked the technological aspect of flight sims, mostly the 3D graphics. I got to work closely with Bruce Artwick on *Flight Simulator* and thought he was an amazing programmer. From him I learned a lot about writing graphics and 3D maths, although the most important thing I learned was about working hard and staying focused for a long period of time to finish something. Matt joined two years later but there was turmoil and it eventually split into two companies, with Bruce and most of the programmers forming BAO (Bruce Artwick Organization) and another group staying with Sublogic. I worked at BAO for a couple more years but was pretty burned out writing flight sims, so went part-time

> **I FELT GUILTY DROPPING OUT OF SCHOOL SO I WENT BACK AND FINISHED MY DEGREE**



CHE-YUAN WANG

"I MET MIKE KULAS at on-campus interviews at University of Illinois. I was wearing the first suit I'd ever owned, and had gone through 30+ interviews for various electrical engineering jobs... Mike was the first guy in all of my interviews that wasn't wearing a suit. He was representing Looking Glass Software at the time, and that interview was the first time I realised that people actually made games. I followed up and stayed in touch with Mike, visiting him a few times at his office, where he showed me the work he was doing on *Ultima Underworld*. I also showed him a demo of an assembly language pixel art *Street Fighter* clone where I had Ken and Ryu functionally animating across the screen. Mike ended up giving me a chance to work at the unnamed startup which eventually became Parallax Software on a game called *Miner* which eventually became *Descent*. I'm thankful that it set me on a 20+ year path of creating and publishing games."



before an opportunity for us to work for Looking Glass came along.

So you didn't end up staying there long?
We worked on a game called *Car And Driver* which was technically strong, but not much of a game. After that, we both wanted to do something different with more creative input and an ownership stake in what we did. We pitched a game but Looking Glass didn't want to do it, so we pitched it elsewhere and Apogee signed up. We left and formed Parallax.

It must have been daunting, striking out on your own?
We felt we didn't have much to lose. If it failed, we'd go back to working for other people. We signed a contract for our game, *Inferno*, and Matt moved to Champaign [Illinois]. Negotiating contracts was new and difficult, particularly not knowing what would constitute a good deal. I was stressed a lot more than nervous, much more than I realised at the time.

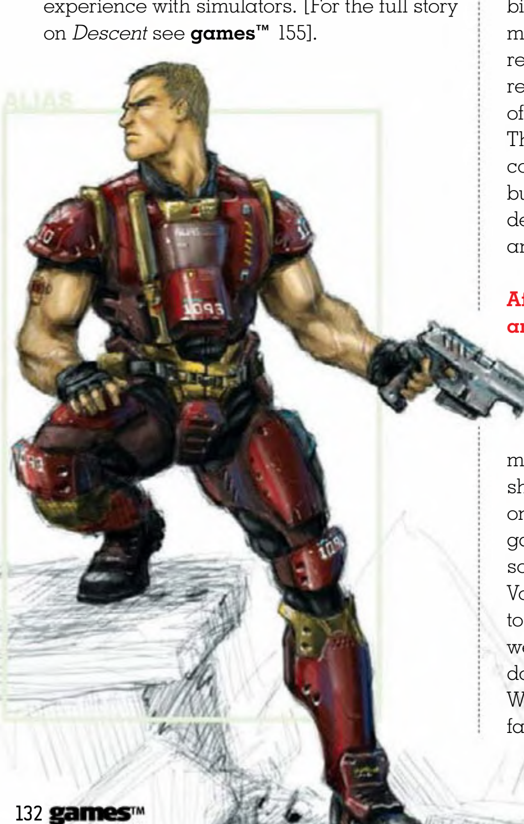


JOHN SLAGEL

"MIKE WAS LIKE a rock star and we all looked up to him. He's got a great, very dry, mad-scientist sort of humour. He also taught me a lot about optimisation and algorithms, but most importantly, how to finish projects."

Mike Kulas kneels front row centre in this picture of the *Descent* development team circa 1994.

And then *Inferno* became *Descent*. How did your experience with flight sims help?
I think that experience drove a significant part of the design of *Descent* as we were essentially making an indoor flight simulator. When released, it was criticised for being derivative in some ways, but it was a fresh take on the genre that came from our experience with simulators. [For the full story on *Descent* see **games™** 155].



***Descent* was a massive hit. Presumably a sequel was inevitable?**
Descent 2 actually started life as *Descent: CD-Enhanced* as CD-ROMs were becoming more common and Interplay wanted cutscenes, redbook audio and higher resolution graphics. Then, because of the success of the original, they wanted a full sequel. I don't recall us having much of a plan about what changes we were going to make – just that we wanted new robots, bigger weapons and lots of other stuff. We mostly thought it up as we went along! My recollection was that it outsold *Descent* at retail, but a large amount, perhaps majority, of our royalties came from bundle deals. There were a lot of hardware peripherals coming out at the time and it was often bundled with them. We supported a lot of VR devices, unusual controllers, sound cards and other things I've long forgotten about…

After *Descent 2*, Parallax split and you and Matt went your separate ways. What happened there?
When we formed Parallax in Champaign it was considered a temporary location. We were going to move to a mutually agreeable location after shipping *Descent*, but we couldn't agree on a place. Fortunately the funds from the games enabled us to form two companies, so Matt formed Outrage and I formed Volition. It went smoothly and we continued to work together for years. The plan was that we would alternate sequels with Outrage doing *Descent 3* and Volition then doing *4*. We actually started *4* but Interplay had lost faith in the brand, so it was abandoned.

Instead we got Descent: Freespace?
Adam Pletcher was the lead designer and drove the key aspects of the game, but the way we did things back then, everyone had input into the games. I think the *X-Wing* and *Tie-Fighter* games were strong influences – I hadn't played them but they were among Adam's favourites. I was happy with working on *Descent* games at the time, but making a grander, more open-world space simulation was a good combination. It actually went way over budget but I covered these costs out of *Descent* royalties, because I didn't want to ask Interplay for more money as I figured they'd want a lower royalty rate in return. I was confident the game would do well, and good thing for us, it did.

Volition then created the popular *Red Faction* series. How much were you involved with this?
Less so than previous games as the company was getting larger, and I was focused on signing development deals and selling Volition to THQ. I did write some code for the original *Red Faction* which became the last I wrote for a shipped game. I was actually more focused on *Summoner*, which



Descent was a massive hit for Parallax.

was a PlayStation 2 launch title. Perhaps as it was our first console title, and our first with a new publisher, I subconsciously treated it as more important than *Red Faction* and directed more of my time there. I thought it would be a more successful game because there was considerable conflict with *Red Faction* due to a lot of strong-willed people on the team. It had a tortured dev process, starting life as *Descent 4*, a space flying game, although I think ultimately that led to it being a better game. But this came at a cost. In the end it worked out, but it didn't always look like it would.

How did THQ come to buy Volition?

I talked to several companies but pretty soon THQ was the one I focused on. They were looking to own development capability and I wanted to reduce risk. I thought it would mean I would be able to spend more time closer to product development, but that didn't happen. Shortly after *Red Faction* shipped I was feeling burned out from ten years of Parallax and Volition and focusing on the business side was rejuvenating.

And then *Saints Row* was another hit for Volition.

In 2002, we were working on a game that was cancelled and needed to come up with a new project. So we asked the former team to come up with ideas. From this came a game concept called *Bling Bling* that evolved into *Saints Row*, having been originally more hardcore and without the wacky humour. But my involvement in the design was very small and I had long since stopped programming. By this period I was far enough away from development that I would rarely even talk about design elements with the team – if I was concerned about something I would talk to the producer. I was a lot more focused on budgeting and related issues.

What caused you to leave Volition in 2011?

I left more because of how I felt about what I was doing rather than what was happening. I had grown tired of my job and kept thinking I'd find something else to do, but not figuring out what that was. Dan Cermak became the general manager and had been instrumental in building the structure and management at Volition, which made it easier for me to leave.

Would Red Faction be your proudest achievement?

No, I guess that would be *Descent* or *Freespace*, but I don't really like to talk about being proud of things. *Descent* is special because if it were not successful, there would have been no more company, but that's close to true with *Freespace*, and maybe even *Saints Row*. But the main reason I wanted our games to do well is because I didn't want other people to be able to tell us what to do. If your games are commercially successful then you earn that freedom. It may not be a view shared by many, but I thought it was more important that our games be commercial successes that artistic ones.

I REMEMBER RED FACTION FONDLY – I WAS VERY WORRIED THAT THE GAME WOULD BE TERRIBLE!



The *GTA*-esque *Saints Row* was a popular smash for THQ and Volition..

Which period of your career do you have the fondest memories of? What do you remember most vividly?

The hardest times, and the times when the consequences of failure are most severe are the most memorable. While we were building *Descent*, Matt and I were also negotiating the splitting of Parallax, we had the first contract cancelled and were within a couple of weeks of shutting the studio, while keeping it all from the team. I also remember *Red Faction* pretty fondly because I was very worried that the game would be terrible and lose a lot of money! So it was a profound relief that it turned out well, and I was happy for the team because they worked so hard on it.

Do you still keep in touch with Matt and the others?

Yes, and we had a *Descent* team reunion a few years ago. I'm in frequent contact with Matt, and several of the Volition team I see around town. But today I'm a co-owner of a restaurant and spend a few hours a week on that. I'm dabbling in a software project, but mainly I golf, I run and I mow the lawn. I sometimes think of things I could have done differently, but regret is not the right word. I guess the main thing is that I wish I had involved myself more deeply in some problems that I might have been able to solve, but didn't because of time and other constraints. I've gone back to GDC the last few years just to see people from the old days. I don't buy a badge, and feel out of place walking around, but it's good to see people.



Red Faction's development was dogged with personality issues but was a hit nonetheless.

GAME CHANGERS

MYST

Released: 24 September 1993 **Publisher:** Brøderbund **Developer:** Cyan **System:** Mac OS



Myst sold 6.3 million units in just nine years – and is still widely celebrated by many as one of the game's that made the CD-ROM into a killer format.

Developed by a sibling duo – Robyn and Rand Miller – Myst was one of the first games to popularise the CD-ROM and succeeded in setting up the non-violent adventure genre, too. We explore the inception and creation of the game, and the impact it had on the industry…

ON ITS RELEASE, *Myst* sat upon the knife-edge of public opinion – it was precariously balanced, with one side of the gaming hardcore lauding its unique approach to exploration and atmosphere, whilst others lamented its slow-burning, plodding layout.

Thing is, that didn't matter – *Myst*'s success wouldn't lie within the devotees of gaming back in the early Nineties, no: it was the general public that *Myst* grabbed by the optic nerves, refusing to let go until players unaccustomed to games had finished the title's final mind-bending puzzle. Despite some underwhelming reviews, *Myst* was the best-selling PC game *of all time* for years after its release. It remained best-seller for just under a decade, *The Sims* took its crown in 2002, nine years after *Myst*'s release.

Myst began life as an experiment – originally meant to be an interactive children's book, where clicking on various items on the picture pages would take you deeper into the book itself. *Myst*'s then-unique UI has its origins here, it was then expanded by Cyan's desire to experiment with interactive storytelling and the creation of non-linear worlds – which, in 1993, seemed more like a pipe dream than a reasonable result.

After creating two children's games, iterating on the core design philosophies that came from that original picture book idea, Cyan was approached by a Japanese publisher (Sunsoft) who wanted the developer to work on a game for an older audience. Cyan had already pitched what would become *Myst*

THE ANATOMY OF MYST

MYST MIGHT HAVE BECOME THE DE FACTO TEMPLATE OF THE PUZZLE GENRE, BUT WHAT INFLUENCED IT IN THE FIRST PLACE?



SURREAL ART

★ Robyn Miller – one of the games developers – painted surreal art on canvases during his adolescence: you can see the impact in-game.



THE MYSTERIOUS ISLAND

★ Jules Verne's 1874 fiction provided much inspiration to Cyan – the game even took its name from part of the book that was set on an uncharted island in the South Pacific.



HYPERCARD

★ Cyan has stated the game wouldn't even exist without Macintosh's very own programming software (ironic considering *Myst*'s PC success).

to Western publishers – namely Activision – but the fledgling publisher rejected the idea, wanting Cyan to stick to kid's games.

Funded by Sunsoft, Cyan began work on *Myst* – which would be completed two years later. One of the core tenets of the game's design was to make it not feel like a PC game – hence the transparent UI that would set the standard for all exploration/mystery games to come after. More than that, though, *Myst* set the standard for immersion in games; its world was incredibly realistic for its time, and needed very little introduction or illustration to let players understand how to play it.

But it wasn't just the graphics that won people over – beautiful and immersive as they may be, *Myst* was also supported by a fantastic ambient soundtrack with music composed by Robyn Miller, one of the brothers that oversaw production at Cyan. Originally, the game was built without music (the developers thought that the score would detract from the overall impact of the game), but after extensive work, a 40-track synthesized OST was incorporated into the game to great effect.

Still, Chris Brandkamp (responsible for the game's ambience and sound effects) opted to compose the world's nascent audio with the same philosophy in mind: realism. Sounds were intentionally amplified to act as a soundtrack of sorts in itself: the team wanted realism, they wanted to convey mood through the sound of waves, of gears, of psithurism. It's another string to the game's immersive bow. This design philosophy was doubled down on in the game's sequel, *Riven*.

The constant quality of the sound and graphics fed into the open world level design – which was built intentionally so the player could get lost in it. This approach to what was essentially a puzzle game (which were ostensibly linear at the time) really shook up the genre. It showed developers and players alike that you could build a world first and foremost, and then shape the gameplay elements around the realism later.

THE CONSTANT QUALITY OF SOUND AND GRAPHICS FED INTO THE OPEN WORLD LEVEL DESIGN

KEY FACTS

- The development team often used to imagine their grandparents trying to play the game when attempting to simplify the UI.
- *Myst* contains 2,500 frames throughout the whole game – one for each possible area the player can explore.
- A parody game, *Pyst*, was released in 1996 – it had no gameplay and featured only an island vandalised by frustrated *Myst* players.
- The PC version of *Myst* could be bought packaged with a CD-ROM Drive, which was not yet a common item on PC towers.

This open world was fleshed out with a story that, again, for its time was a revelation. You were a silent protagonist – The Stranger – who was more of a reactionary force than an active one. You were played off against two brothers that aimed to undo all the work their father had done on the island, and it all played out in a totally non-violent way. The art of the world was therefore constructed to keep the player intrigued, guide them on when there was fairly little action to keep them plugged in.

With its minimalist controls (mouse-based movement and *one* action button), its cinematic presentation and its lack of any distinct action, *Myst* frustrated as many people as it enraptured. But in 1993, when most people owned computers for word processing, spreadsheets or other miscellaneous tasks, *Myst* was a revelation – it was one of the first games to take advantage of the CD-ROM, packing the disc to the brim with sound, graphical texture and world size, and was no doubt revolutionary in bringing casual players into the PC gaming world.



GAME CHANGERS

8 GAMES THAT OWE THEIR EXISTENCE TO MYST

MYST WAS A TRAILBLAZER FOR A PLETHORA OF GAMES TO FOLLOW, SOME OBVIOUS AND SOME NOT-SO-OBVIOUS. FEW NON-VIOLENT GAMES WOULD EXIST WITHOUT MYST. HERE'S OUR COLLECTION OF GAMES INSPIRED BY THAT 1993 MASTERPIECE…



DRAGON QUEST VII

■ A STRANGE PLACE to start, but by the creator's own admission, *Dragon Quest VII* reverted on the tropes of the series, getting rid of the intense battle systems and replacing them with a more exploration led design philosophy. This was because Yuuji Hori – series creator – played an awful lot of *Myst* during the game's development.



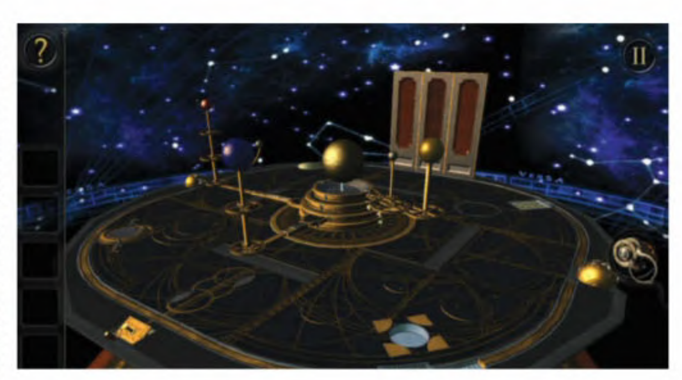
MACHINARIUM

■ MORE OF A traditional point-and-click than *Myst* ever was, *Machinarium* often draws comparisons to the 3D exploration game, despite its 2D presentation. With a world as isolated and varied as *Myst*'s, an understated soundtrack as well-constructed as *Myst*'s and a selection of puzzles that'd infuriate experienced gamers, it's a perfect spiritual follow-up to Cyan's original.



AMNESIA: THE DARK DESCENT

■ AMNESIA DOESN'T HAVE a huge puzzle focus like *Myst*, but the puzzle design and environmental focus of the game owe a lot to its spiritual predecessor. The psychological survival-horror takes its storytelling beats from *Myst*, too arranging them in a more implicit, player-focused way.



THE ROOM

■ FIREPROOF GAMES' THE ROOM is a gorgeously-rendered puzzle game, constructed entirely in Unity, that focuses around solving specifically 3D puzzles – holding up items, rotating them, discovering what use they have in the context of your current puzzle… it is to iOS what *Myst* was to PC.



THE 7TH GUEST

■ WANDERING THROUGH A mansion, solving a series of logical puzzles and unlocking bytes of narrative at a time, while under the thrall of amnesia the entire time… sound familiar? The *7th Guest*, like *Myst*, split gamer's opinions down the middle, but it's worth a shot if you're into the adventure genre.



GONE HOME

■ STEVE GAYNOR, CREATOR of *Gone Home*, has stated *Myst* as a source of inspiration for the game – noting that the development team took cues from the atmosphere and interactivity of Cyan's effort, but say that they opted to avoid any of the 'crazy abstract puzzle stuff'.



THE WITNESS

■ TAKING PLACE ON a strange island – filled with puzzles and unexplained, advanced technology – there are more than a few similarities to *Myst* in Jonathan Blow's newest adventure puzzler. *The Witness* does away with the rigid structure, though, allowing you to effectively free-roam the whole island.



EVERYBODY'S GONE TO THE RAPTURE

■ THE CHINESE ROOM'S Dan Pinchbeck has actually come out against *Myst*, saying publicly that it's got 'more influence in theory than in practice', but his studio's work in the 'walking simulator' genre would arguably not have the roots it does if it wasn't for the foundations *Myst* laid out over 20 years ago.



BEST BOSS

JUPITER KING [METAL SLUG 3]
SNK [SNK] NEO-GEO **2000**

JUPITER KING WAS created by the Rebel Army, to protect the sect's secret factory from attacks… until you come along and dismantle the lumbering machine. We love this boss for myriad reasons – firstly, it (and the whole level it occupies) is a gigantic reference to Kojima's old *Metal Gear* games. A few theories suggest Jupiter King's design is a literal representation of Metal Gear itself – that it's one of Kojima's titular weapons in an early prototype stage – but we think it's more of a nod than anything else. Secondly, there's a nice bit of fan service in the background of the fight that harkens back to the first *Metal Slug* game – specifically in mission two – where you're fighting Hairbuster Riberts. As a whole, the boss is a love letter to its own series and that of its peers; it's more than just a fight. We love those moments of deeper meaning in games – and it helps it's a pretty epic encounter, too!


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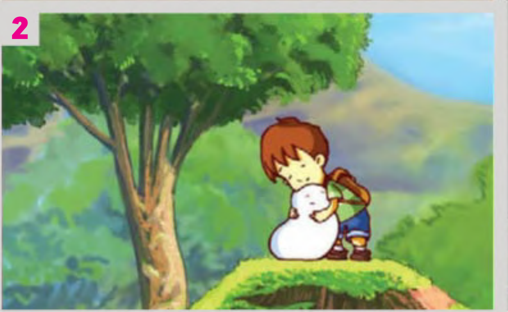
ESSENTIALS

10 PURELY COSMETIC GAME MECHANICS

■ Videogames come in many shapes and sizes – some require you to know your way around an entire mouse/keyboard setup, some can be played with one button. Almost all of them have some mechanics that are ultimately pointless. We've taken two pages to celebrate these phatic mechanics here, because don't they deserve as much recognition as that game-winning jump-attack? Probably not, but here they are...











Sackboy Dancing
Game: LittleBigPlanet series

1 Hold down either L2 or R2 and snap the left and right analogue sticks of your DualShock controller around at any point in a *LittleBigPlanet* game, and you'll make your little Sack-Person dance a groovy jig on screen. Hit R3 and it'll alter the movement of your cloth avatar's hips, too – meaning you can get all *Saturday Night Fever* without even having to leave your seat. Just to be clear, this serves *no* purpose in game (at all), but then it's always fun to pretend to slap your co-op partners into submission if they're intent on running ahead of you and leaving you to boil alive in vats of steaming oil... or something like that.

Hugging Your Blob
Game: A Boy And His Blob

2 A pretty simple game at its core, *A Boy And His Blob* is an age-old NES title that was remastered for the Wii back in 2009. The Wii version – overflowing with Nintendo's trademark sentimental values – lets you simply stop every now and then and hug your blob. That's it. You just stand around, admiring the rich and bright scenery, locked in a gentle embrace with your amorphous best friend. The wind breezes gently, the grass sways and there's no hint of peril whatsoever. We'd call this 'pointless', but that would – by extension – call warming your heart pointless, and that just isn't the case.

Getting A Haircut
Game: The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt

3 Although most of the additional haircuts and facial hairstyles for *The Witcher 3* are being dropped in as free DLC down the road, the main game still does a good job of letting you experiment with a series of interesting looks. In fact, the first mission post-prologue sees you travel to meet an emperor, only for his squire to take pity on you and give you a bath and a shave. Elsewhere in the game, hair growth's purely cosmetic (you can't get a bit of chicken sandwich stuck in your beard to increase your Toxicity or anything) but it's nice to find a barber and get those straggly bits of hair shaped up.

Washing Your Car
Game: Gran Turismo 5

4 You've been out on the tracks for hours on end and you've been racing all day. You're tired, sweaty and achy (it takes a surprising amount of muscle to control some of these mega-horsepowered beasts). But your car is in worse shape – the dust from the edge of the tracks has been smeared down your door, other racers have flung stones that have chipped your paintwork... and the leather seats of the interior smell more than a bit fusty. Thankfully, in *Gran Turismo 5* you spend 100 credits to wash your car and it does... nothing. A totally pointless exercise in money spending, that, all for the sake of vanity. Bravo!

Pigs (Or 'Poogies')
Game: Monster Hunter 4 Ultimate

5 You've just taken down one of the most terrifying beasts to ever prowl the world – a Gore Magala, no less – scalped it and taken its skin as your trophy. You're a Monster Hunter, one of the best around, and you're on your way home to celebrate your success... but what's that? There's a pig (dressed as a pirate) stuck in a hole. Well, you wouldn't be human if you didn't help out, right? The pig, once lifted out of its rut, dances and squeals with delight, giving you its nautical get-up in thanks. You go back to your hut, dress *your* pig in the outfit and dance with it. Why? No one really knows.



Ruining The Arenas
Game: Hearthstone

6 Every *Hearthstone* stage has a number of interactive elements you can tap on for various ends – whether that's raising the portcullis of a castle, firing a catapult, operating a forge or just picking apart some flowers one petal at a time. In total, every stage has four elements that can be played with. Why? Isn't it obvious? It's a time sink, something to mindlessly do whilst your opponent takes forever on their turn. You can see them comparing their cards, looking at your side of the table, getting frustrated, so what do you do to keep yourself occupied? Tap on a sleeping guy's tent, of course. Job's done!

Flipping The Bird
Game: Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon

7 If you weren't within range of an enemy and hit the melee button in *Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon*, you'd simply stick your middle finger up at them in what is a *really* satisfying and strong animation. We used to make use of this feature quite a lot – we'd stealthily draw our neon bow and arrow (still the best *Far Cry* weapon in the whole series), find a perch and flip the bird to our erstwhile foes. Then we'd proceed to silently and efficiently kill every single one of them with a glowing arrow to the face. And they'd never know just what indignity befell them prior to death.

Measuring Stuff
Game: Earthbound

8 We seem to be including *Earthbound* a lot in these lists lately, but it's just so packed with innovative, interesting and plain weird stuff that it's difficult not to. This particular appearance owes to the fact you carry a ruler around with you in the game, and you can hold this ruler up against objects to see how long they are. These virtual metrics are never required in any subquest, you don't need to know the size of anything to unlock certain items, and the measuring option never appears in dialogue. If you do it for everything, you just look like a mad kid measuring up objects for your own weird compulsion.

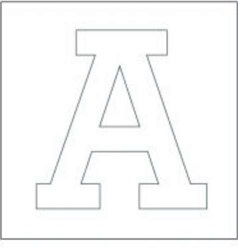
Humming (Without A Voice)
Game: Transistor

9 There are actually two innocuous mechanics you can do throughout *Transistor*: flourish and hum. The former does nothing damaging – it's just a lovely way of Supergiant showing off its art style and animation technique: watching Red throw the sword in the air and catch it is wonderful. Then there's the hum – every bit of background music has an additional layer you can access with the hum. This is pretty heart-breaking when you consider Red is a singer that lost her voice – the harmonies she hums out become even more eldritch and haunting when you listen in context.

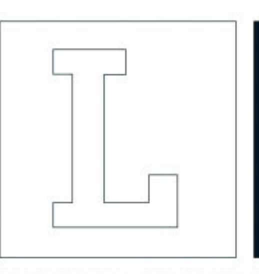
Petting A Cat
Game: No More Heroes

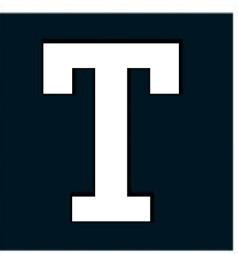
10 When you're not saving your game by sitting on a toilet, or wandering around the bizarre open world of Santa Destroy doing very little else, why not take a moment to chill out in Suda51's ridiculous *No More Heroes* by rubbing your cat's belly. Named Jeane, this cat just hangs around your flat, being adorable. Get it to roll on its back and you can rotate the Wii's remote control around and make the cat spin around like something from *The Exorcist*. We're not exactly sure if that's something PETA would approve of, but hey, this is a videogame, and there are plenty of significantly worse things you can do to animals in titles elsewhere.











FUSION NANO 960 GAMING PC

MANUFACTURER: **CHILLBLAST** PRICE: **£1129**



WHAT'S MORE IMPORTANT to you; form or function? Increasingly, we're being given the option to pick something in between the two as PC gaming setups become more popular and high-end parts become cheaper by the day. If you're looking for something that's going to let you play current releases as optimum settings in a small, clean form factor, but you're not too worried about upgrading, then Chillblast's Fusion Nano could be the unit for you.

In terms of design you couldn't really ask for anything classier. The anodised aluminium unibody comes in a range of colours and looks smart in all of them. Standing only 25cm tall, it's a stunningly compact PC with a very minimalist facia that features only a power button and keeps other essential ports at the top of the unit. The top-mounted fan should mean the internals have no trouble drawing in air for cooling, which is handy, because it's pretty packed in there.

Thanks to the GeForce GTX 960 2GB graphics card, Intel Core i5-4690K processor overclocked to 4.3GHz, 1TB hybrid SSHD and 8GB of RAM, there's unlikely to be anything you can't play immediately on this prebuilt system if you want to. It's certainly more than enough to handle the minimum requirements of the Oculus Rift for instance, which may well be the reason you're considering this type of machine in the first place. And the six USB 3.0 ports as well as HDMI means you'll have no issues with lag when you get everything connected up.

The small form factor and smaller parts mean that upgrading this piece of kit may be a tricky and perhaps a slightly more expensive proposition, but as pre-built systems go, Chillblast's are typically very reasonable and this one is no different. You're sacrificing a little future proofing for style, but this will last you a good few years running the highest-spec titles without any really troubles.

www.ebuyer.com

VERDICT 8/10







GAMING CLOTHING



EXPERT KILLER

Is this a clue to the future direction of the *Creed* franchise? *Assassin's Creed* Swimdicate perhaps? Sorry, that was a bad pun, but this shirt we like. We find it hard to take Ubisoft's series too seriously these days anyway.
www.threadless.com



SELF DESTRUCTION

We don't know that we've ever seen such a darkly amusing shirt in relation to *Mario* before, so this Bob-omb image is pretty affecting. In fact we're not sure if it's not just downright depressing.
www.threadless.com



OFFICIAL STREET FIGHTER RYU OF HEARTS

Brand new and officially licensed shirts from Capcom, this Ryu number is one of our favourites, we have lots of time for headshots of Blanka and Ken.
www.funstock.co.uk



MONOPOLY SKYLANDERS

SOLD BY: **FORBIDDEN PLANET INTERNATIONAL**
PRICE: **£39.99**

IF YOU NEEDED any more evidence of the *Skylanders* phenomenon reaching new heights then this adaptation of the classic *Monopoly* board game may be what you have been waiting for. Many famous locations from the game can be competed over with pieces based upon a chompy, a sheep and Kaos to fight over even before the game begins. The *Monopoly* format is as engaging and infuriating as ever, so it may be worth giving it a look if you're a fan.
www.forbiddenplanet.co.uk

ASSASSIN'S CREED SYNDICATE CANE SWORD

SOLD BY: **GAMER HEAVEN** PRICE: **£34.99**

THE GAME HAS only been announced and already we have a swathe of *Syndicate* merchandising available to promote some of the game's many new features. A prime example is Jacob Frye's cane sword, the hidden blade that allows this young assassin to travel around London armed without calling attention to himself. Interestingly, it can also function as a scythe with an additional hidden blade at its tip. All very sneaky and very much in keeping with the era.
www.gamer-heaven.net



HALO KOTOBUKIYA ARTFX STATUE 2 PACK



SOLD BY: **FORBIDDEN PLANET**
PRICE: **£143.99**

MUCH LIKE THE rest of the Kotobukiya range of statues, these new Spartan creations are just about as detailed and customisable as you could possibly wish for. With 10 points of articulation you can place them how you want and switch between magnums and plasma swords. Perhaps most importantly if you've already been investing money in this range of statues the Mark VI and Mark V armours are compatible with *Halo ArtFX+* sets so you can switch some of the armour around if you want too.
www.forbiddenplanet.com

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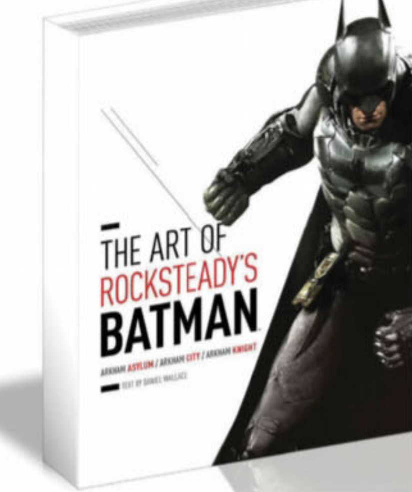






THE ART OF ROCKSTEADY'S BATMAN

PUBLISHER: **ABRAMS BOOKS**



WHILE IN ITS earliest days the *Arkham* series may have appeared to be a little constrained by the strengths and weakness of what the Unreal Engine could achieve, artistically, Rocksteady always seemed capable of more. You only need to look through some of the concept designs for characters in this book and some of the in-game asylum files to see it had a wonderful grasp of how the game's heroes and villains should look. As time has gone by, we would say much more of this has been translated from pages to pixels and as we enjoy our time playing Arkham Knight, we'd say the studio is closer than ever to bringing its concepts to life.

Having all three games in Rocksteady's trilogy included here offers a great insight into the escalating scope of what the London studio was building over the last decade. From the squalid halls of Arkham to the neon-lit streets of Gotham, this team has continued to do amazing amounts of concepting, much of which wouldn't have looked out of place in the pages of the *Dark Knight's* comic incarnations.

We imagine there's a great deal more that could have been included in this collection and that if anything *Arkham Knight* has been a little short-changed having to share pages with its much more compact predecessors, but having it all together offers a different level of insight into the trilogy and that much we can appreciate.

www.forbiddenplanet.com

VERDICT  8/10



DEVIL MAY CRY GRAPHIC ARTS

With concept and cover art from all four *Devil May Cry* games as well as the anime series, this feels like it's only scratching the surface of some of the amazing imagery this series has generated. It's still a pretty nice collection of work though, all of which is stunning.

www.forbiddenplanet.com



SILENT HILL DOWNPOUR: ANNE'S STORY

Exploring the back story of one of *Downpour's* more mysterious characters, Anne's Story looks at how Anne Marie Cunningham managed to find her way to *Silent Hill* and what fate awaited her there in some gorgeously rendered graphic novel pages.

www.forbiddenplanet.com



33 1/3 KOJI KONDO'S SUPER MARIO BROS. SOUNDTRACK

Taking an academic approach to the music of *Super Mario Bros.*, Andrew Schartmann explores the technology behind one of gaming's most iconic soundtracks as well as the influence it had on future titles and what themes were explored.

www.amazon.co.uk



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HE WHO HESITATES IS LOST! WE SHALL RETURN ON 13 AUGUST!